

HANDBOOK OF  
**Norse  
Mythology**

**John Lindow**



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# Handbook of Norse Mythology

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# Handbook of Norse Mythology

John Lindow

A B C  C L I O

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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## A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

**B**ecause this book is intended for a general audience, a decision was made to limit the use of the specialized characters usually employed to represent the sounds of the older Germanic languages, including those of Norway and Iceland during the Viking Age and Middle Ages. Specifically, in names and titles the letter *þ* (thorn) is here represented as *th*, *ð* (eth) as *d*, and *ǫ* (o-hook) as *ö*. These letters have, however, been retained in discussions of specific terms, such as “*þylja*” and “*goði*.” Other characters, such as *æ*, *œ*, and *ö*, have been retained. In addition, the nominative singular final *r* has been removed from names, and the accent marks have been removed from the names “Odin” and “Thor,” since these forms are the most widely used in English.

These compromises naturally create inconsistencies, but I hope they will not divert from the aim of the work, namely, to let the texts speak for themselves and to give the reader an idea of the main issues in the study of Scandinavian mythology.





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## INTRODUCTION

**W**hen most of us use the word “myth” in conversation, we refer to something that is not true. When historians of religion use it, they generally refer to a representation of the sacred in words. When anthropologists use it, they often refer to narratives that tell about the formation of some social institution or behavior. None of the definitions, however, will hold directly for the characters and stories this book treats. That is in part because of the enormous time frame: Materials relevant to the study of Scandinavian mythology, broadly defined, span two millennia or more. But even if we limit the discussion to the relatively small body of texts from the Viking Age and later Middle Ages about the gods Odin, Thor, Frey, and the others and their constant battles with forces of evil and chaos, it is difficult to reconcile these texts with any one of the narrow definitions of myth suggested above. Certainly they had some truth value to the people who composed them and those who wrote them down, but these were not always the same people—usually they were not—and it is obvious that what was true, sacred, and an account of how the world got to be the way it is to a Viking Age pagan poet can have been none of the above to a Christian scribe copying the story in a manuscript hundreds of years after the Viking Age. It is therefore easier and more enlightening to talk of formal criteria and content.

In form, then, myth in general, and the texts that comprise Scandinavian mythology in particular, are narrative, although this narrative is couched in both verse and prose. In general, one expects myth to recount important events that took place at the beginning of time and helped shape the world, and Scandinavian mythology indeed has sequences that tell of the origin of the cosmos and of human beings. The story goes on, however, to the destruction and rebirth of the cosmos, and everything in it is presented in light of an enduring struggle between two groups of beings, the gods on the one hand and giants on the other hand. These terms are to some extent misleading: Although the group that creates and orders the cosmos is often referred to by words that can best be translated “gods,” the principal word, “*æsir*,” is explicitly presented by the most

important medieval interpreter, Snorri Sturluson, as meaning “People of Asia,” and indeed the word often has the feel in mythological texts of an extended kin group or tribe rather than of a collective of deities. And the other group, the ones who aim for the destruction of the cosmos and disruption of order, are certainly not “giant” in the sense that they are demonstrably larger than the gods. They are usually called the “jötnar,” and again as the term is used in the mythology it feels more like a tribal or kin group than anything else.

The world in which the æsir and jötnar play out their struggle has its own set of place-names but is essentially recognizable as Scandinavia. There are rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, storms, cold weather, fierce winters, eagles, ravens, salmon, and snakes. People get about on ships and on horseback. They eat slaughtered meat and drink beer. As in Scandinavia, north is a difficult direction, and so is east, probably because our mythology comes from west Scandinavia (Norway and Iceland), where travel to the east required going over mountains, and going west on a ship was far easier for this seafaring culture.

It is helpful to think of three time periods in which the mythology takes place. In the mythic past, the æsir created and ordered the world and joined with another group, the vanir, to make up the community of gods. Somehow this golden age was disrupted in the mythic present. As dwarfs, humans, and occasionally elves look on and are sometimes drawn into the struggle, the æsir and the jötnar fight over resources, precious objects, and, especially, women. The flow of such wealth is all in one direction, from the jötnar to the æsir, and in fact one might divide the narratives of the mythic present into those in which the gods acquire something from the giants and those in which an attempt by the giants to acquire something from the gods is foiled. In the mythic future, this world order will come to a fiery end as gods and giants destroy each other and the cosmos, but a new world order is to follow in which the world will be reborn and inhabited by a new generation of æsir.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Scandinavia consists of the low-lying Danish islands and the peninsula of Jutland and the great Scandinavian peninsula, which in its northern reaches is divided in two by the huge mountain range known as the keel. On the eastern side lies Sweden with its gentle Baltic Sea coast and a great deal of fertile land, especially in the central parts of Sweden, around the lakes Mälaren, Vänern, and Vättern, and to the south. On the west lies Norway, where tall mountains spring from the coast, which is protected from the Atlantic by a series of small islands. To the south lies Denmark, which until 1658 included not only Jutland and the islands

but also southern portions of the Scandinavian peninsula. The names are indicative: Norway, the northern way, the sea route up and down the coast; Denmark, the forest of the Danes, which separated them from the Saxons; Sweden, the kingdom of the Svear, the people around Mälaren who at some point during the Viking Age subdued their southern neighbors in Götaland. The name “Scandinavia” appears to be the Latinized form of an unattested German word, \*Scandinaujā. (The asterisk before the word means that it was never recorded but rather was reconstructed by linguists.) This word is a compound, the second part of which, *aujā*, means “island.” What the first part means has been endlessly debated. It appears to contain the same root as the name of the southern part of Sweden, Skåne, and may therefore mean “Skanian island.”

As the ice from the last great Ice Age retreated, the low-lying lands of the south were first exposed, and pollen analysis indicates settlement on Sjælland and elsewhere by around 10,000 B.C.E. We know little about these settlements, but by 6500 B.C.E. or so, a hunting and fishing culture may be identified. By 2500 B.C.E. or so, there are indications of agriculture and the raising of animals. At around 2000 B.C.E. the archaeological record begins to show characteristic small ax heads, made of stone but carefully copying the marks of metal pouring that was used for such axes to the south in Europe. A hypothetical culture associated with these axes and an even more hypothetical immigration of persons with them from Europe is known as the Boat-Ax culture. Around 1000 B.C.E. the Scandinavian Bronze Age begins, and from this same period there are numerous spectacular rock carvings, which may have had a religious purpose. The Scandinavian Iron Age begins circa 500–400 B.C.E., and its first stage, up to around the beginning of our era, is known as the Pre-Roman Iron Age, despite incipient trade with the Roman Empire. Around the beginning of our era we begin to get runic inscriptions from Scandinavia and the Continent in a language that is identifiably Germanic, and in Scandinavia the so-called Roman Iron Age begins. On the Continent this is the time when the Germanic peoples confront the Roman Empire, with increasing success. By around 400 C.E. gold appears in Scandinavia, and the Germanic Iron Age begins; the Older Germanic Iron Age, from circa 400 to 550 or 575 C.E., is also known as the Migration Period because of the extensive movements of the Germanic tribes around Europe, as is especially known from accounts of interaction with Germanic peoples written by Roman historians. Scandinavia was probably the homeland for some of these peoples. For example, the Burgundians would appear to have come from the island of Bornholm, the Goths either from Götaland in Sweden or from the island of Gotland off Sweden’s east coast, and the Vandals either from the Vendel area of Sweden or what is now Vendsyssel in Denmark. Part of the Anglo-Saxon immigration to England probably came from Angeln in what is now Denmark.



*Buckle clasp in silver, gold, and precious stones from Admark, Norway, seventh century C.E. (The Art Archive/Historiska Museet Norway/Dagli Orti)*

The period circa 600–800 C.E. is usually called the Younger Germanic Iron Age, although Swedish archaeologists usually called it the Vendel Period because of the wealth of finds from Vendel, an area northeast of Lake Mälaren. During this period, too, there was extensive trade from across the Baltic centered at Helgö, then an island in the southern part of Lake Mälaren. And in Den-

mark it appears that a Danish state was already beginning to establish itself in Jutland.

Between circa 600 and 800 C.E., a number of linguistic changes occurred in the northern area of the Germanic speech community, and by the end of this period one may speak of Scandinavian languages. By this same time some Scandinavians burst spectacularly on the European scene. Although there appears to have been sporadic raiding before the autumn of 793, in that year Vikings sacked the rich monastery at Lindisfarne off the east coast of northern England, and for nearly three centuries Vikings, and later, the Scandinavian kingdoms, would play a major role in European history. What the word "Viking" originally meant is not known; the European writers, mostly clergymen, who made it famous painted a fairly clear picture of pagan marauders who destroyed and despoiled wherever they went. Certainly there is some truth to such a picture, especially in the early part of the Viking Age, when the Scandinavian sailors do seem to have had military advantages, with their light, swift, maneuverable ships. But it is important to consider that there were individual forays, larger expeditions, armies wintering in England and on the Continent, and, finally, the North Sea empire of Cnut the Great. Besides this military activity there was continuous trade and a pattern of settlement in the lands to which the Scandinavian ships came.

Some of these lands were already settled, such as the French coast and northeast England. In Normandy the Scandinavians left relatively little trace, but in England their influence was great. The creation of the Danelaw—a relatively fixed area in which Scandinavian law obtained—arranged by Alfred the Great and the Danish king Guthrum in the 880s, indicates just how pervasive the Scandinavian presence was. The enormous number of Scandinavian loanwords into English indicates an extended period of contact between the English and the Scandinavians, and as the Scandinavian kingdoms began to emerge during the ninth and tenth centuries, there was not infrequently contact with English courts. For example, one of the sons of Harald Fairhair of Norway, Hákon the Good, had been fostered at the court of King Athalstan of England. According to tradition, Harald had united all Norway into a single kingdom (this had occurred somewhat earlier in Denmark and would probably happen somewhat later in Sweden, for which the sources are rather meager). During the reign of Harald (870–930) serious emigration began over the sea to the islands to the west: the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Faroes, and Iceland. This push was finally to reach Greenland and North America, and it was paralleled by extensive travel from Sweden to the east, to Finland and Russia, down the great Russian river systems to Constantinople and the Black Sea.

According to the Icelandic sources, powerful chieftains fled western Norway and settled in Iceland in order to avoid the tyranny of Harald Fairhair. There may



*Some English jet was exported from Yorkshire to Norway during the Viking Age. This carving of a pair of bear-like gripping beasts brings to mind related examples in amber. (Historisk Museum, Bergen Universitetet)*

be some truth in this, and even if Norway was hardly the only source of immigration into Iceland, it remained the country most connected to Iceland and the kingdom into which Iceland was finally folded in 1262–1264. But from the time of the settlement—Iceland was “fully settled” by 897 according to learned authors of the twelfth century—until then, Iceland functioned as a commonwealth in which judicial power was in the hands of a group of chieftains, and there was no king or other central authority. These leaders were called *goðar* (sing., *goði*), and although the sources rarely show much religious activity on their part—and what they do show may not be reliable—the term clearly incorporates the word for “gods.” Therefore they must have had some sort of religious function. *Goðar* had “thing-

men,” who owed them allegiance and whom they in turn helped; every free man had to be some *goði*’s thing-man. The word “thing” (*þing*) means assembly, and one of the duties of a *goði* and his thing-men was to attend the local assemblies and the national assembly (*alþingi*) to participate in litigation and, one assumes, to renew friendships and exchange stories. There were few towns in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and none at all in Iceland, so the assemblies, and especially the annual national assembly, must have played an important social role. There, one-third of the law was recited from memory each year by the only national official in the country, the lawspeaker. The position was one of status and influence but of little direct power. People lived on farms, and the basic social unit was the household. So important was this principle of household membership that people could switch from one household to another only at certain specified times of the year, the “moving days.” Farming consisted primarily of raising cattle and the hay that would be needed to support the cattle.

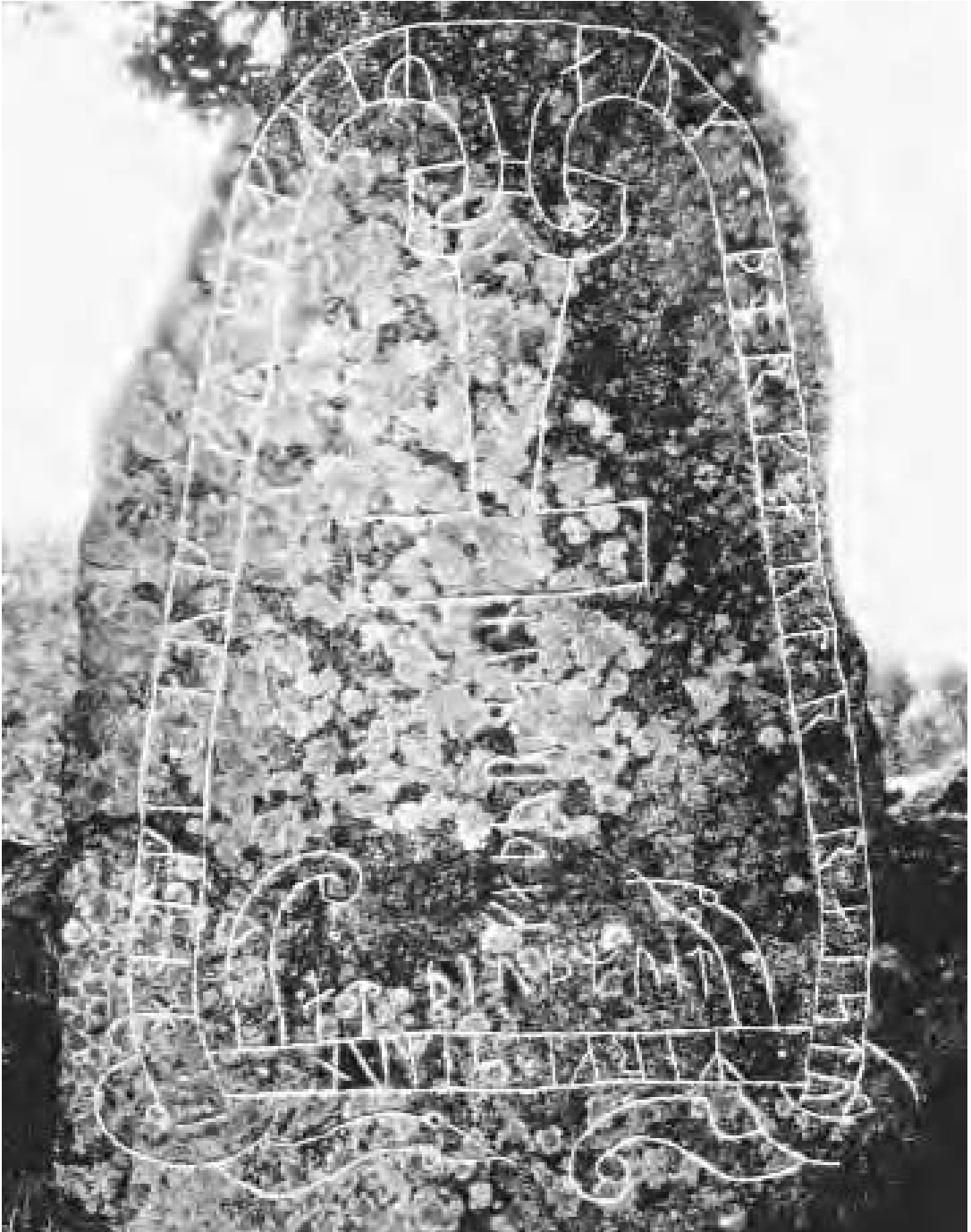
The Viking Age is by definition a period when Scandinavians and Europeans interacted, and without that interaction and the written documents it gave rise to in Europe, archaeologists might have called the period from 800 to circa 1000 the “Scandinavian Iron Age.” The beginning of the period, as we have seen, is portrayed by those who wrote the history, the literate members of the Christian church, as a meeting between pagan and Christian, and it was only natural that as time passed attempts would be made to convert the Scandinavians, as Charlemagne had converted the Saxons. Indeed, those Scandinavians who traded or settled in Christian lands had ample contact with Christianity, and many of them either converted or had themselves “prime-signed,” that is, they accepted the sign of the cross, the first step toward baptism, so that they could do business with Christians. Furthermore, the gradual emergence of European nation-states in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and their increasing integration with Europe made it inevitable that the issue would arise at the national level as well. There is documented missionary activity in Scandinavia from the early Viking Age onward, most famously by Ansgar, the “apostle of the north,” who worked with both Danish and Swedish kings in the first half of the ninth century.

The process was to bear fruit first in Denmark in the later tenth century, when King Harald Bluetooth witnessed the priest Poppo carrying a red-hot piece of iron, with no harm to his hands, as a demonstration that Christ was greater than the pagan gods. At Jelling in Jutland, King Harald Bluetooth erected an elaborate rune stone celebrating his parents and himself, the person who “made the Danes Christian,” as the Jelling rune stone says.

In Norway there is evidence of Christian burial from around this time, and Hákon the Good was a Christian king whose reign ended around 960, when Harald converted. But Hákon was buried in a mound and celebrated in pagan poetry. Olaf Trygvason, who ruled Norway from 995 to 1001, had been baptized in England, and he undertook a program of forcible conversions throughout the country. He was of a family from the Oslo fjord, and the most obdurate pagans were allegedly in the other power center in the country, the area near modern Trondheim. Credit for the final conversion is given to Olaf Haraldsson. When he was killed at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030, a battle having far more to do with national politics than religion—his opponents were supported by Cnut the Great, the Christian king of Denmark and England—people quickly saw signs of his sanctity, and he became the most important saint of northern Europe.

We are less well informed about the conversion in Sweden. Although the kings of Sweden were Christian from the beginning of the eleventh century, the monk Adam of Bremen, in his history (ca. 1070) of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen in northern Germany, which had responsibility for Scandinavia, reported a vast pagan temple at Uppsala, with idols of the pagan gods and gruesome sacri-





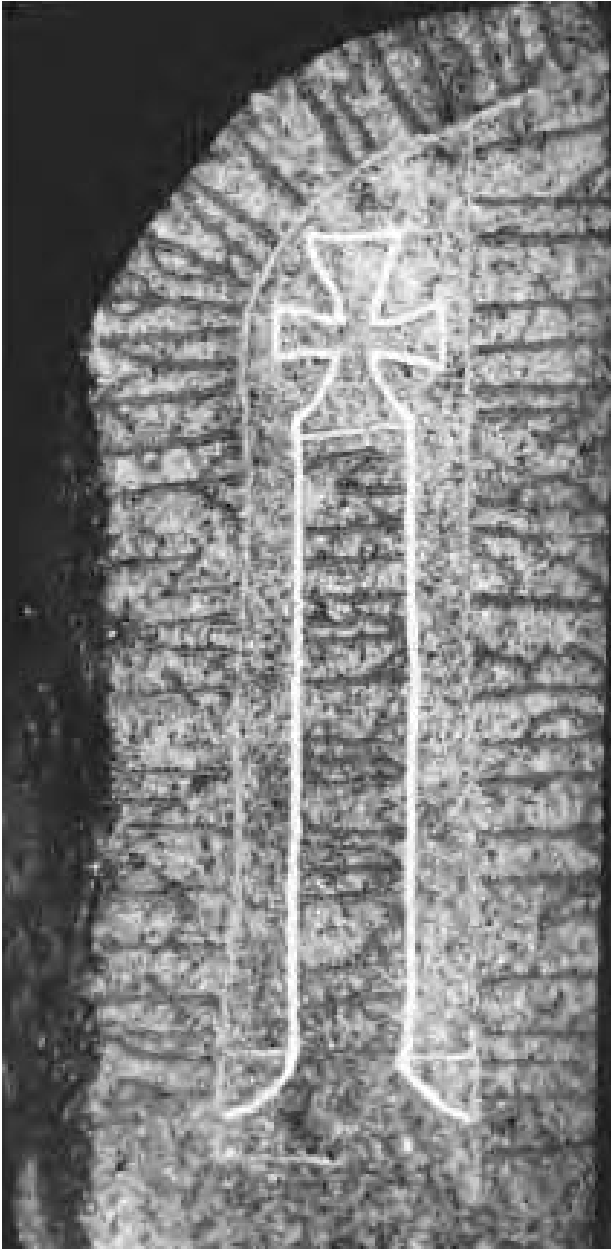
*Rune stones depicting Thor's hammer like this one in Sweden are fairly easy to find. Compare this to the rune stone on page 10; both are from the late Viking Age. (Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)*



*Illustration from Flateyjarbók, a late-fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript. The scene may depict St. Olaf killing a monster. (Bob Krist/Corbis)*

fices. But eleventh-century rune stones from that very same part of Sweden are openly Christian: “God rest his soul,” many of them ask, in runes surrounding an incised cross. Most historians accept that Sweden was fully Christian by the beginning of the twelfth century at the latest.

The conversion in Iceland followed a fascinating course. Missionaries were active in the latter decades of the tenth century, but so were their pagan opponents. Olaf Trygvason, whose role in the conversion was championed by twelfth-century and later Icelandic monks, took hostage some wealthy young Icelandic travelers, and there was further resolve among Christians in Iceland to complete the conversion. However, as the two sides approached the *althingi* in Iceland in the year 1000, it appeared that war would break out. Finally it was agreed that a single arbiter should choose one religion for the entire land, and the lawspeaker Thorgeir, a pagan, was chosen. After spending a night under his cloak, he emerged and decreed that Iceland should be Christian. And so it was. At first some pagan practices were permitted if carried out in secret, but later even this permission was rescinded. However, for reasons that are no longer quite clear, the old stories about the gods were not lost on Iceland. Poems about them lived on in oral tradition, to be recorded more than two centuries after the conversion. Some mythological poems may actually have been composed by



*Compare this rune stone with a cross to the one on page 8. (Statens Historika Museum, Stockholm)*

Christians in Iceland, and Snorri Sturluson made extensive use of the mythology in his writings.

Thus Scandinavian mythology was, with virtually no exception, written down by Christians, and there is no reason to believe that Christianity in Iceland was any different from Christianity anywhere else in western Europe during the High Middle Ages. Although the earliest bishops were sent out from Norway, quite soon the bishops were native born, and by the end of the eleventh century there were two episcopal sees, the original one at Skálholt and a new one for the north at Hólar. There were several monasteries, adhering both to the Benedictine and Augustinian orders, and there was also one nunnery in Iceland before the demise of the commonwealth in 1262–1264. At least some of the monks were literate, and they composed both Latin and Icelandic texts. Some lay persons of higher status were also apparently literate, at least in Icelandic, but all writing, whether in the international language of the church or in the vernacular, was the result of the conversion to Christianity, which brought with it the technology of manuscript writing.

Before and after the church brought manuscript writing to the north, there was some writing using the native runic writing system. Since in the older runic alphabet there are no horizontal strokes, it is assumed that the system was originally invented for scratching the letters on wooden sticks, whose grain would obscure horizontal strokes. Only special circumstances permit wood to remain



*Detail of the rune stone from Rök, Sweden, from the ninth century C.E. Created by Varin for his dead son, Vemod, with center as ode to Theodoric, king of the Goths. (The Art Archive/Dagli Orti)*

undecayed in the ground for archaeologists to dig up centuries later, and as a result most (but by no means all) of the extant runic inscriptions are on stones. It is important to stress that carving on wood or stone is a fairly laborious process and that the kinds of things recorded using the runic alphabets tended to be short and of a different nature from texts that can be easily written only in manuscripts. Most runic inscriptions are utilitarian, and despite popular conceptions, they have little to say about mythology or magic.

The oldest runic inscriptions are from around the time of the emergence of the Germanic peoples and are written in an alphabet of 24 characters whose origin is greatly debated. Early in the Viking Age a new runic alphabet developed in Scandinavia, one with 16 characters. Later several variations grew out of this basic Viking Age runic alphabet. Of the approximately 4,000 runic inscriptions, most are from the Viking Age; most of these are from Sweden; and most of these are from the provinces around Lake Mälaren, especially Uppland. Most are memorial: They explain who erected the stone, whose death is memorialized, and what the relationship was between the two. Although the few rune sticks and other kinds of runic inscriptions that have been retained show that runes

could be used in a great many ways, Scandinavia through the Viking Age was for all intents and purposes an oral society, one in which nearly all information was encoded in mortal memory—rather than in books that could be stored—and passed from one memory to another through speech acts. Some speech acts were formal in nature, others not. But like speeches that politicians adapt for different audiences, much ancient knowledge must have been prone to change in oral transmission. Without the authority of a written document, there was no way to compare the versions of a text, and we therefore cannot assume that a text recorded in a thirteenth-century source passed unchanged through centuries of oral transmission. This fact makes it extremely difficult to discuss with any authority the time or place of origin of many of the texts of Scandinavian mythology, especially eddic poetry.

“Eddic poetry” is the name we use for a group of about 35 poems, all of them recorded in Iceland during the Middle Ages, nearly all in the thirteenth century. The term “eddic” is a misnomer: Most of these poems are in a single manuscript, and when the learned bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson first saw this manuscript in the seventeenth century, he perceived a similarity to the book called *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson and imagined that this manuscript, another “*Edda*,” had been composed by Sæmund Sigfússon the Learned, a priest who flourished in the years around 1100 and who according to tradition was the first Icelandic historian, although no works by him have been preserved. This manuscript was therefore called not only “*The Edda of Sæmund*” but also the “*Elder Edda*,” since Sæmund had lived a century before Snorri. It has been more than a century since anyone has taken seriously the idea that Sæmund had anything to do with the composition of this work or that it preceded Snorri, but we still call it “*Edda*”: the *Poetic Edda*. Because the manuscript became part of the collection of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, we now call it “*Codex Regius* (royal manuscript) of the *Poetic Edda*,” and we call the kinds of poems in it “eddic poetry.”

*Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, which is now preserved in Iceland, was written down toward the end of the thirteenth century, probably in the years around 1280. It appears to be a copy of a now lost manuscript, probably written circa 1250, and it seems that some of the poems in it may have been written down as early as the very beginning of the thirteenth century. These are not, however, the mythological poems. *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* contains 31 poems, sometimes joined or interrupted by prose passages, arranged in a deliberate order by the unknown scribe who wrote it, an order that moves from the mythological to the heroic. It is ordered within the mythological and heroic sections as well.

The manuscript begins with *Völuspá* (Prophecy of the Seeress), which gives a summary of the entire mythology, from the origin of the cosmos to its destruc-



Pages from the famous Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda. (British Library)

tion to its rebirth. *Völuspá* can also be regarded as an Odin poem, since it is Odin who causes the seeress voicing it to speak. The following three poems are also Odin poems: *Hávamál* (Words of the High One), which contains Odinic wisdom and several stories that describe the acquisition of that wisdom; *Vafthrúdnismál* (Words of Vafthrúdnir), which describes the context of wisdom between Odin and the wise giant Vafthrúdnir; and *Grímnismál* (Words of Grímnir), which describes Odin's ecstatic wisdom performance at the hall of the human king Geirröd. The next poem, *Skírnismál* (Words of Skírnir) or *För Skírnis* (Skírnir's Journey), belongs to Frey, in that it describes the journey of Frey's servant Skírnir to woo the giantess Gerd. The following four poems are probably to be assigned to Thor. The first of these is *Hárbarðsljóð* (Song of Hárbard), in which Thor and a disguised Odin exchange insults and anecdotes. The next is *Hymiskvida* (Hymir's Poem), an account of Thor's journey to the giant Hymir and fishing up of the Midgard serpent. *Lokasenna* (Loki's Verbal Duel) follows, and in it Loki insults all the gods. It is a Thor poem because it is Thor who finally chases Loki away. The last of the Thor poems is *Thrymskvida* (The Poem of Thrym), a burlesque in which Thor, disguised as Freyja, retrieves his hammer from the giant Thrym. The last two mythological poems are *Völundarkvida* (Völund's Poem) and *Alvíssmál*

(The Words of All-wise). *Völundarkvida* has no gods in it and to us today looks like a heroic poem, but the compiler of *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* must have thought that Völund's elfish background was good reason to situate the poem here, elves being creatures from the "lower mythology" (neither of the gods nor of the giants). *Alvíssmál* has another such creature in Alvíss, the "all-wise" dwarf who sues for the hand of Thor's daughter and is kept dispensing synonyms by the god until the sun comes up and turns the dwarf to stone.

At this point the heroic poems begin, but the gods are by no means wholly absent, especially from the poems telling the early parts of the story of Sigurd the dragon-slayer. Odin, Hœnir, and Loki appear in the prose header to *Reginismál* (Reginn's Poem), and Loki appears in the poem itself. There are several allusions to Odin, and these poems contain much fascinating information about such mythological beings as norns, dwarfs, and the like.

There is a second main manuscript containing many of these poems, but, unlike *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, it is not apparently ordered. Because it was retained as manuscript number 748 in the Arnamagnæan Collection in Copenhagen, it is called AM 748. It was written down a bit later than *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*. There are few differences between the texts of the poems in the two manuscripts, but AM 748 contains a mythological poem not included in *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, namely, *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr's Dreams), an account of Odin's questioning of a seeress about the fate of Baldr. One additional mythological poem, *Rígsthula* (Ríg's Rhymed List), which tells of the origins of the human social order, is found in a manuscript of Snorri's *Edda*.

Each eddic poem had its own history before it was written down, and there has been much speculation about the dates and origins of the various poems. Most scholars believe strongly in the possibility that some of the mythological poems were composed, after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, by antiquarians secure enough in their Christianity to be able to compose in the old form about the old gods. *Thrymskvida* is the poem most often mentioned in this context, but there are many others. On the other hand, there is no way to tell whether a poem, even one that looks as young as *Thrymskvida*, might have been composed during the Viking Age or even, theoretically, earlier, and changed in oral transmission so as to look like the product of a Christian antiquary. Whatever the original dates and origins of the mythological eddic poems, it seems to me that the similarities outweigh the differences and that the pictures of the gods are fairly consistent.

In form, the eddic poems are short stanzaic poems that rely chiefly on two meters, *fornyrðislag*, "old way of composing," and *ljóðaháttur*, "song meter." *Fornyrðislag* is equivalent to the verse form used in Old English, Old High German, and Old Saxon, the other Germanic languages in which verse has been pre-

served, although the division into stanzas appears to be a Scandinavian innovation. Like the poems in the second half of *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, verse in Old English and Old High German is about heroes, and even the major surviving example of Old Saxon, a verse life of Christ called *Heliand* (Savior), exhibits heroic diction. Heroic eddic poetry, then, especially when it uses *fornyrðislag*, appears to be the heir of common Germanic poetry. We may also surmise that there was verse about gods during the common Germanic period, but only Iceland has preserved any. *Fornyrðislag* tends to be used for third-person narrative, *ljóðaháttr* for dialogue. A version of *ljóðaháttr* is called *galdragalag*, “meter of magics,” and its use, although sparing, has considerable stylistic power.

Besides these anonymous mythological and heroic poems, there is far more verse that has been transmitted to us with the name of a poet attached to it. The word for “poet” was *skáld*, and these verses are usually called “skaldic.” They are far more complex in form than the eddic poems, both with respect to meter and, in the case of the more complex longer poems, with respect to the structure of the poem itself. In addition, they use a far more complex diction. The high degree of formality and complexity make some skaldic verse difficult. Although a great many skalds are known, ranging from Icelandic saga heroes to bishops, some of the most famous skalds served at the courts of kings and other powerful rulers. Sometimes these men gave the skalds valuable gifts, such as a shield, and if the shield was decorated with scenes taken from narrative, the skald might compose a poem describing those scenes as thanks for the gift. Such a shield poem can be of considerable interest in the study of mythology and heroic legend, for the scenes depicted on shields tended to be from those realms. There are other examples of this sort of ekphrasis (Greek: “a plain declaration,” in this context a text about an image) in the skaldic corpus, such as Ólf Uggason’s *Húsdrápa*, which describes carvings in a newly built hall in late-tenth-century Iceland. In some cases we lack the context of a poem but can surmise the existence of an ekphrasis.

Skaldic poetry is retained as individual verses not (apparently) connected with any poem and as fragmentary or whole poems. The most elaborate poems are called *drápur* (sing., *drápa*), which are broken into sections by means of one or more refrains, which here means lines repeated in the same place within a given stanza. A *drápa* should also have introductory and concluding sections that lack the refrain(s). I will translate *drápa* in this book as “refrain poem.” A poem without refrains was called a *flokkr*, “flock.”

The earliest known skald is ordinarily taken to be Bragi Boddason the Old, whom most scholars think was Norwegian and active in the second half of the ninth century. According to Snorri, he was associated with the semilegendary Viking Ragnar Lodbrók (Hairy-breeches). Fragments of a poem addressed to Rag-



nar, *Ragnarsdrápa*, exist. The poem, as we have it reconstructed, describes four scenes on the shield Ragnar gave Bragi, and three of these have to do with the mythology: Thor's fishing up the Midgard serpent, Gefjon's plowing land from Gylfi, and Hild's inciting Högni and Hedin to endless battle.

Another early Norwegian skald was Thjóðólf of Hvin, who flourished around the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century and was patronized by several Norwegian rulers. Two of the poems attributed to him are important mythological sources. Of these, the first is *Ynglinga tal* (Enumeration of the Ynglingar), which Thjóðólf composed for Rögnvald heidumheiri (Honored-highly) Óláfsson, a king from the important Vestfold district in the Oslo fjord. *Ynglinga tal* lists the ways that 22 generations of the Ynglingar, kings centered in Uppsala and predecessors of Rögnvald, met their deaths and where they were buried. The poem clearly originally served a dynastic purpose, but, especially in its discussion of the earliest kings, it has much to tell us about mythology and religion. Thjóðólf also composed the shield poem *Haustlög* (Autumn-long, which may refer to the poem's gestation period). He describes two mythological scenes that adorned the shield: Loki's betrayal of Idun and her apples to the giant Thjazi and her rescue, and Thor's duel with Hrungnir, the strongest of the giants.

From the earliest skaldic tradition come three "eddic praise poems," poems in eddic meters (but in which the meters are ordinarily more strictly adhered to than in eddic poems proper), composed to honor not gods or ancient heroes but recently deceased kings. Two of these describe Valhöll in connection with the arrival there of the king the poet wishes to praise. One, the anonymous *Eiríksmál*, was allegedly commissioned by Gunnhild, the widow of King Eirík Haraldsson Bloodaxe, who died in 954. The other, attributed to Eyvind Finnsson skáldaspillir (Spoiler-or-debaser-of-poets), praises Hákon the Good, who died in 961.

Úlf Uggason was an Icelandic skald who lived around the tumultuous period of the conversion. Around 985, according to the chronology of *Laxdœla saga*, Úlf composed a *drápa* celebrating the building of an ornate hall by Óláf pái (Peacock), an important chieftain in western Iceland. The hall was decorated within with scenes from the mythology. Three of the scenes are in what we now think we have of the poem, which Úlf recited at the wedding of Óláf's daughter. These are Baldr's funeral, Thor's fishing up of the Midgard serpent, and Loki's fight with Heimdall.

Another skald who lived during this period was Eilíf Godrúnarson, about whom nothing is known—not even his nationality—other than that he was patronized by Hákon Sigurdarson, jarl of Hladir, a notorious pagan. Eilíf composed *Thórsdrápa*, a complex and difficult account of Thor's journey to Geirröd.

Besides these poems treating mythological subjects, there are numerous other relevant texts and fragments. A poem like *Sonatorrek* (Loss of Sons) by Egil

Skallagrímsson, the tenth-century hero of *Egils saga*, may tell us something about his own religious attitudes. “Rán has robbed me greatly,” he says, alluding to the drowning death of one of his sons.

In skaldic poetry, Thor is the most frequent mythological subject. The most tantalizing of these are two verses addressing Thor in the second person, both probably from the last years of paganism in Iceland.

Skaldic poetry is valuable not just for the direct exposition of mythological subjects but also for its very diction. The primary stylistic feature is the kenning, a two or more part substitution for a noun. Kennings consist of a base word (e.g., “tree”) and a modifier (“of battle”). What is a “tree of battle”? This figure is indeed something like a riddle. Because he stands tall in a battle, a “tree of battle” is a warrior. What is the “din of spears”? Because battles are noisy affairs, the “din of spears” is battle. Kennings are known from eddic poetry and the verse of the other older Germanic languages, but they took on a special importance in skaldic poetry because skalds linked them by using one kenning as the modifier of a base word to create another, for example, “tree of the din of spears” for warrior. The examples I have chosen so far are relatively obvious, but skalds also made kennings based on narrative, that is, on heroic legend and myth. For example, they called gold “the headpiece of Sif,” which is only comprehensible if one knows the myth in which Loki cuts off Sif’s hair and has the dwarfs make golden hair to replace it. Kennings can be helpful in dating myths, for a kenning that relies on a myth indicates the myth was known to the skald and his audience at a given time. Seeing whether a minor god or goddess is used in the base word of a kenning—for example, “Gná of rings” for woman—can give us some indication as to whether the figure in question was at all known.

Skaldic poetry, then, was a showy, ornate oral poetry, which must have taken much time to master; indeed, it is clear that a certain amount of training would have been needed just to understand it as a member of the audience. It is certainly possible that knowledge of the myths survived the conversion to Christianity because of the value early Christian Iceland placed on the skaldic poems about kings and rulers. In other words, it is possible that the continued transmission of poetry about early kings and battles as historical sources required a continuing knowledge of heroic legend and of myth, not as the object of belief or as something associated with cult but simply as stories that people interested in the history of their own culture had to know. In the same way, students today may study the Bible to be able to understand allusions in older literature. It is even possible to imagine that eddic poems continued to be recited for their narrative value in support of the kenning system, although once belief in the older gods had ended, they could also be recited purely by and for those who enjoyed a good story.

Certainly such a motivation associates the earliest recording of eddic and skaldic poetry and the systematization of the mythology by Snorri Sturluson. Snorri was born during the winter of 1178–1179 into a wealthy family, the Sturlungar, who were to give their name to the turbulent age in which Snorri lived: the Age of the Sturlungs. He grew up at Oddi, the foster son of the most powerful man in Iceland; one of his foster brothers was to become bishop, and Snorri himself was a *goði* and twice held the office of lawspeaker. Through various alliances he soon grew to be one of the most powerful men of his time, and he was deeply involved in the politics of the Age of the Sturlungs. During this time politics became increasingly deadly, and many disputes were settled with weapons. Snorri was assassinated in 1241 by enemies who claimed to be working on behalf of the king of Norway.

Snorri had visited that king, Hákon Hákonarson the Old, in 1218–1219, and he composed a poem in praise of the boy king and his regent, the jarl Skuli. This poem is called *Háttatal* (Enumeration of Meters), and it exemplifies 101 metrical or stylistic variants in its 102 stanzas, equipped with a commentary. From an explication of meter and style, it seems, he moved to a discussion of the system of kennings and rare or poetic words and names called “*heiti*,” which he embodied in a treatise called *Skáldskaparmál* (The Language of Poetry). This text comprises for the most part lists of kennings and *heiti* arranged by the nouns they can replace, illustrated with a large number of citations from skaldic poetry, quoting in blocks of half a stanza. But besides this, he used a narrative frame to retell some of the more important myths that underlie skaldic kennings. According to this frame, a man named Ægir or Hlér from Hlésey (“Hlér’s Island,” modern Læssø off the Danish coast), a master of magic, goes to Ásgard, where the *æsir* receive him well but with visual delusions. The hall is illuminated by swords alone. Twelve male and twelve female *æsir* are there. Ægir sits next to Bragi, who tells Ægir many stories of events in which the *æsir* have participated. The first of these is the full story of the alienation and recovery of Idun and her apples, the death of Thjazi, and the compensation granted to Skadi. When Bragi has finished, he and Ægir have a short conversation about a few kennings, and then Ægir asks Bragi the origin of poetry, which elicits the story of the origin and acquisition by Odin of the mead of poetry. At the end of this story Ægir puts questions and Bragi answers them in a way that looks very much like the master-disciple dialogue that so typifies didactic texts in the Middle Ages. Scholars pay special attention to this dialogue, for it sets forth more clearly than in any other place some of the principles of skaldic poetry. After it there follows a paragraph inviting young skalds to pay attention to the narratives that follow if they wish to learn skaldic poetry, but reminding them that Christians are not to believe in pagan gods or the literal truth of the narratives. This can hardly be Bragi’s voice; rather, it is

that of Snorri or, arguably, one of his copyists, and it intrudes on the framing device of a dialogue between Ægir and Bragi. That device is taken up again when Snorri introduces the story of Thor's duel with Hrungnir and of Thor's journey to Geirröd, but thereafter it is dropped. Additional mythic narratives in *Skáldskaparmál* include the acquisition from one set of dwarfs of Sif's golden hair, the ship Skíðbladnir, Odin's spear Gungnir, Odin's ring Draupnir, Frey's boar Gullinborsti, and Thor's hammer Mjöllnir, and the subsequent acquisition from another dwarf of the gold and cursed ring that play a large role in heroic legend. A good deal of heroic legend is also recounted in *Skáldskaparmál*.

It seems that Snorri next was moved to write up the rest of the myths and to do so with a frame story consistently carried out. The result was *Gylfaginning* (Deluding of Gylfi). Here the frame story has a Swedish king, Gylfi, come to visit Ásgard. He does so because he has heard that all goes to the will of the æsir, and he wishes to determine whether it is because of their own nature or because of the gods whom they worship. A wise man with a control of magic, he assumes the form of an old man. But the æsir were wiser in that they possessed the power of prophecy, and, foreseeing his journey, they prepared visual delusions for him. He thinks he arrives at a great hall, and, assuming the name Gangleri, he meets the chieftains there, Hár (High), Jafnhár (Equally-high), and Thridi (Third) and declares his intention to determine whether there is any learned man there. Hár says that Gangleri will not emerge whole if he is not the wiser, and a series of questions and answers ensues, the questions put by Gylfi/Gangleri, the answers given by usually by Hár with occasional amplification by Jafnhár or Thridi. These questions treat the mythology: first the issue of a supreme deity; then the creation of the cosmos, the identity of the gods and goddesses and some of the myths attaching to them, and then myths untreated there or in *Skáldskaparmál*; and finally Ragnarök and its aftermath. Then Gylfi/Gangleri hears a crash, and the hall disappears.

Snorri quotes liberally from eddic poetry in *Gylfaginning*, especially from *Völuspá*, *Vafthrúdnismál*, and *Grímnismál*. The arrangement of the subjects he treats, following the discussion of the "highest and foremost of the gods," which is Gylfi/Gangleri's first question, is essentially that of *Völuspá* in its sweep from beginning to end of mythic time. Snorri also seems to have known eddic poems beyond those he quotes, and he also paraphrases myths that he probably knew from skaldic poetry; but he quotes no skaldic poetry outside the device of the frame, at the beginning of *Gylfaginning*.

If the arrangement of materials to some extent follows *Völuspá*, the frame story itself is reminiscent especially of *Vafthrúdnismál* and other contests of wisdom. We learn Gylfi's motivation for his journey, and he conceals his name. Hár stipulates a wager of heads, but this motif is dropped; indeed, the nearest



*King Gylfi of Sweden questions Hár, Jafnhár, and Thridi, from DG 11, a fourteenth-century manuscript containing Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. (Werner Forman/Art Resource)*

analogy to the hall's disappearance at the end of the text is Thor's visit to Útgarda-Loki, not any myth of Odin. Gylfi takes the Odin-role in this contest of wisdom, as the traveler under an assumed name, and indeed this assumed name, Gangleri, is one of Odin's in *Grímnismál*, stanza 46 and elsewhere. This is somewhat ironic, since Hár, Jafnhár, and even Thrídi are also names of Odin, the latter two also in *Grímnismál*. But as we shall see, Hár, Jafnhár, and Thrídi probably also, in Snorri's view, were no more Odin than Gylfi was.

These three sections, in the opposite order from the one in which I just presented them (i.e., *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*, *Háttatal*) and probably in the opposite order from the one in which Snorri wrote them, make up, with a prologue, Snorri's *Edda*, as the work is called in one of its manuscripts. The meaning of this word is not clear, but it seems to have to do with Latin *edo*, in the sense "to compose," and probably therefore meant something like "Poetics." Certainly Snorri's *Edda*, as a whole, is first and foremost a handbook of poetics, even if it is now far more famous as an explication of mythology.

As I have mentioned, *Skáldskaparmál* contains a warning to young skalds about the pagan nature of the material. It seems that Snorri wished to make this statement more forcefully, and he did so in the prologue to his *Edda*. Here, too, he advances his understanding of the historical nature of the gods and gives us the key to understanding *Gylfaginning*. Snorri starts the prologue to his *Edda* by stating, "Almighty God created heaven and earth and all things that accompany them, and finally two people, from whom genealogies are reckoned, Adam and Eve, and their progeny multiplied and went all around the world." Ultimately, however, after the Flood, people lost sight of God, but they observed that there were similarities and yet differences among humans, animals, and the earth, and they began to trace their genealogies from earth. And seeing the importance of the heavenly bodies for time reckoning, they assumed that some being had ordered the course of these bodies and probably existed before they did and might rule all things. This knowledge they possessed was worldly knowledge, for they lacked spiritual knowledge.

This is medieval speculation on the origin of paganism, and it ascribes to pagans a kind of natural religion, one based on unenlightened observation of the environment. It was especially attractive to Icelanders like Snorri, who traced their genealogies from pagans and for whom the conversion of their land to Christianity was a relatively recent event. The first extant work of Icelandic history writing is a little treatise called *Íslendingabók* (Book of Icelanders), by the priest Ari Thorgilsson the Learned, who wrote about a century before Snorri did, and it is plain that for Ari the conversion was the most important event in the history of the Icelanders. In the Sagas of Icelanders, which were composed for the most part in the thirteenth century but which are often set in pagan Iceland, the

“noble heathen” is a stock character. All that conversion required, according to this theory of natural religion, was for Icelanders to regain sight of God. Unlike the pagans whom Icelanders learned about when they translated and read the lives of the early saints of the Christian church, Nordic pagans were not doomed souls in league with Satan. They were merely sheep who had lost their way.

Snorri now adds a historical dimension to his prologue. After presenting a standard medieval view of the world as consisting of Africa, Europe, and Asia, he says that near the center of the earth, in Tyrkland, lies the city of Troy. A king there was called Múnón or Mennón, who was married to Tróan, the daughter of King Priam; their son was Trór, “whom we call Thor.” He was raised by Duke Loricus, whom he subsequently killed, and he took over the kingdom of Loricus, Trákía (Thrace), “which we call Thrúdheim. Then he traveled widely from country to country, explored the entire continent, and alone defeated all berserks and all giants and the greatest dragon and many animals.” He married Síbil, a seeress, “whom we call Sif.” He begat an entire family, and eighteen generations later was born Vóden; “we call that one Odin.”

Troy was a known place, and Agamemnon and Priam were historical figures known in Iceland from the twelfth century onward. Snorri sets Thor in that environment; that is, he tells us that there was a historical figure whom the Nordic peoples called Thor who lived before Christ was born and who performed historical acts (it is important to remember that berserks and dragons were not as fantastic to medieval historians as they seem to us) that look very much like some of the myths about Thor that later were to be told by the Nordic peoples.

The idea that gods derive from humans whose actions are reinterpreted and deified by later generations is called “euhemerism,” after the Greek philosopher Euhemerus (fl. 300 B.C.E.), whose claim to have discovered an inscription showing that Zeus was a mortal king elevated to deity was generalized into a theory that has had considerable currency down into modern times.

Snorri’s euhemerism in the prologue to his *Edda* continues with Odin, whose gift of prophecy informs him that his future lies to the north. He sets off from Tyrkland with a large band of followers, young and old, men and women, and they brought many precious things with them. Wherever they went people said great things about them, “so that they seemed more like gods than humans.” Odin tarries for a while in Saxony and there sets up his sons as kings. For example, Beldeg, “whom we call Baldr,” he makes king of Westphalia. Traveling through Reidgotaland, “which is now called Jutland,” he establishes the Skjöldungar as the kings of Denmark. His final destination is Sweden. “That king is there who is named Gylfi. And when he hears of the journey of those Asia-men, who were called æsir, he went to meet them and invited Odin to take as much power in his kingdom as he wished, and those good times went with

them, that wherever they stayed in lands, there was peace and prosperity, and everyone believed that they were the cause of that." Odin settles in Sigtúnir (modern Sigtuna, on Lake Mälaren south of Uppsala) and establishes his sons Sæming as king of Norway and Yngvi as king of Sweden after him.

Although the medieval Icelandic word *æsir* (sing., *áss*) etymologically has nothing to do with Asia, the derivation of the *æsir* from Asia-men completed the euhemeristic process. Snorri tells us who the historical figures were who were deified by his ancestors, and he alleviates somewhat the peripheral northern location of Scandinavia by associating it with the ancient center of the world. It is not difficult to imagine that *Gylfaginning* represents the first encounter between Gylfi and the Asia-men and that Gylfi's delusion was in accepting that the stories told to him by Hár, Jafnhár, and Thridi were about gods. In other words, it is easy to believe that Snorri wishes us to believe that Gylfi's meeting with the *æsir* contributed to their euhemerization. This theory makes it possible for a learned Christian author to retell and order mythological narratives of his forefathers in a handbook of poetry; the myths in *Gylfaginning* are told by the Asia-men Hár, Jafnhár, and Thridi (none of whom needs to be Odin), just as the myths in *Skáldskaparmál* are told by Bragi, a known skald.

Snorri's *Edda* is thus very much a document of its time, the Christian Middle Ages, and also of its place, an island where the older poetry, for whatever reason, was still transmitted. As it happens, *Skáldskaparmál* quotes much skaldic poetry known from nowhere else, and without it our notion of the genre would be much poorer. And manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* also contain systematic lists of synonyms called "thulur," doubtless copied there because of the reliance of skaldic poetry on kennings and heiti.

Snorri is also the author of another work, a vast compilation of lives of the kings of Norway known as *Heimskringla* (The Orb of the Earth). Other similar compilations were undertaken in the thirteenth century, but Snorri's is unique in that it starts with prehistory. The first saga in it, *Ynglinga saga*, follows Thjóðólf of Hvin's *Ynglinga tal* and expands or paraphrases it in places, but the saga begins before *Ynglinga tal* does, at Troy in Tyrkland. Thor is not in this version, however, as he is in the prologue to Snorri's *Edda*. Additional information not found in the *Edda* prologue is that Vanaland or Vanaheim—the land or world of the *vanir*—lay along the river Tanais, that is, the Don. To the east lay Ásaland or Ásaheim—the land or world of the *æsir*—whose capital was Ásgard, a great place of sacrifice. Odin was the chieftain who ruled there, and the opening chapters of *Ynglinga saga* are very much about Odin. Snorri starts the euhemerism in this text by reporting that Odin was constantly victorious, which led his men to believe that if he had "blessed" them before battle they would emerge victorious, and they began to call his name when they were in trouble. From this they



got relief, and all their consolation was in him, as Snorri puts it, using vocabulary that is strongly religious. So end the first two chapters.

Chapter 3 of *Ynglinga saga* mentions Odin's long journeys away and the story of his brothers Vili and Vé taking his inheritance and his wife Frigg during one particularly long absence.

Chapter 4 of *Ynglinga saga* offers the fullest account of the war between the *æsir* and *vanir*, understood here of course as a historical conflict. The exchange of hostages is present, although with slightly different details. However, the mixing of spittle and creation of the mead of poetry are wholly absent, doubtless in keeping with Snorri's historical project here. Mímir's head is sent back to the *æsir* and pickled by Odin and used for divination, but we must accept that Snorri found such a concept within historical possibility. He would have been aided in such a supposition by the veneration and use of relics within Christian Europe of the Middle Ages. Also as part of the settlement after the war between the *æsir* and *vanir*, Njörd, Frey, and Freyja join the *æsir*, and Freyja brings the magic art of *seid*, a form of sorcery and divination, associated in the mythology especially with Odin. Brother-sister incest, which was practiced among the *vanir*, is dropped when they join the *æsir*, and Snorri may wish us to believe that the *æsir* were morally to be preferred to the *vanir*, even if both groups were pagan.

Chapter 5 describes the emigration from Tyrkland, again motivated by Odin's seeing that his future lay to the north. Again he goes through Saxony, but this time he stops in Ódinsey (modern Odense on the Danish island of Fyn) and sends Gefjon to look for land. The story of her plowing up land from Gylfi and the quotation of the Gefjon stanza by Bragi Boddason the Old are also in *Gylfaginning*, although again the narrative details are slightly different. "Odin and Gylfi contested much in tricks and illusions, and the *æsir* always were the more powerful," Snorri writes, in an apparent allusion to the euhemeristic frame of *Gylfaginning*. Odin settled at Sigtúnir, and, as in the prologue to Snorri's *Edda*, he established other *æsir* in their dwelling places.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on Odin's characteristics and comprise a significant description of him. To his friends he appeared fair of countenance, but to his enemies fierce and grim. He spoke only in verse, and poetry arose from him and his chieftains. In battle he could make his enemies blind or deaf or overcome with fear, but his warriors could go berserk. He was a shape-changer, his body lying apparently inert while he was off and about in some animal form. Here I see the key to this "historical" Odin of Snorri, for this is a classic description of a shamanic trance and journey. If Snorri's historical Odin was a shaman from Tyrkland, he was just a charismatic version of the Sámi shamans who are described in the medieval Scandinavian historical record. To cite but one example among a great many, *Historia Norvegiae* (History of Norway), a work

composed presumably in Norway before 1211, describes a shamanic trance and journey to the world of the spirits witnessed by Norwegian traders among the Sámi people in the Norwegian mountains. The author describes the event as though it were fact, as indeed it was for medieval Scandinavians. Odin did not have to be a god to do what Snorri has him do in *Ynglinga saga*. Snorri says explicitly that Odin was a master of seid, which surely refers to the shamanic arts. "His enemies feared him, but his friends relied on him and believed in his strength and in Odin himself." So Snorri expressed his euhemerism at this point. And he extended it by reporting that Odin and his chieftains taught their skills to others, which I take to be an attempt on Snorri's part to account for shamanism among the Sámi. Snorri knew from the saga record (and wrote later about such subjects in *Heimskringla*) that Icelanders, too, had practiced seid during the pagan period, and his historical theory therefore must have been that shamanism originated with Odin and was lost by the Scandinavians upon conversion to Christianity but was retained by the Sámi, who were unconverted in his time.

In chapter 8 Snorri writes that Odin established various pagan customs, primarily cremation funerals, but also various sacrifices. In chapter 9 Odin dies, not in the jaws of a monstrous wolf but of old age. He has himself marked with the point of a spear and gathered for himself all the warriors felled by weapons. He said he wished to go to Godheim or Godheimar, and from this the Swedes concluded, according to Snorri, that Odin had gone to ancient Ásgard and would live there until eternity. "Belief in Odin and calling on him grew up anew." Snorri must have imagined that Godheim was a historical land, misunderstood by the Swedes in connection with their euhemerism, for *goð* is a word for pagan gods. Subsequently in *Ynglinga saga* he has two of the kings of the Ynglingar set out to look for Godheim, to the east in "Greater Sweden."

Njörd ruled the Swedes after Odin. He was followed by Frey, who made Uppsalir (modern Uppsala) the capital. His was a reign of peace and prosperity, the "Peace of Fródi" according to Snorri. Because of this he was worshipped even more than other *goð*. When Snorri uses a word for pagan gods here, he must feel that the euhemerization of the *æsir* had been completed. Frey is the first of the Ynglingar, and his successor, Fjölfnir, is the first king cataloged in Thjóðólf's *Ynglinga tal*. From this point, *Ynglinga saga* follows *Ynglinga tal* closely, and the strictly mythological section is at an end. However, the rest of *Ynglinga saga*, and other parts of *Heimskringla* as well, also contains information that is useful for the study of Scandinavian mythology.

Eddic and skaldic poetry, Snorri's *Edda*, and *Ynglinga saga* are the most important direct sources of Scandinavian mythology, and as I have shown, each has its history and is anchored, either by recording or composition, in thirteenth-century Christian Iceland. Iceland recorded its older traditions with

extraordinary diligence, and within this large vernacular literature there is much that is of interest for the study of Scandinavian mythology, especially among the sagas.

The word *saga* is related to the verb “to say” and in medieval Icelandic means both “history” and “narrative.” There are many kinds of sagas, of which one category, for example, comprises sagas of the Norwegian kings of the sort that are in *Heimskringla*. The other most important saga genres are the mythic-heroic sagas (*fornaldarsögur*, literally “sagas of an ancient age”; sg., *fornaldarsaga*) and the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*). The mythic-heroic sagas are an amorphous lot joined essentially by being set long ago or far away, that is, before the settlement of Iceland or in the Viking lands to the east. Gods appear as characters in such mythic-heroic sagas as *Völsunga saga*, in part a retelling of some of the heroic materials of the second half of *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, or *Gautreks saga*, which tells of an assembly of the gods to set the fate of the hero Starkad. The Sagas of Icelanders recount no myths but rather are seemingly sober accounts of events carried out mostly in Iceland during the pagan period. As a result of this time setting, they sometimes give information about paganism, such as the account of the pagan temple in *Eyrbyggja saga* or of a horse sacred to Frey in *Hrafnkels saga*. Scholars agree that one must proceed with care in using such accounts, since they may include antiquarian reconstructions of the past, but as we have seen, such caution must be used with virtually every text of Scandinavian mythology.

Some other vernacular texts are also of interest. Short independent texts are usually called *thættir* (sing., *tháttir*), which etymologically means “thread” and suggests the interweaving of such texts in larger works, as would be the case when they were recorded in manuscripts. Some of these are quite relevant to the subject. For example, *Sörla tháttir* tells how Freyja acquired the Brisinga men, a torque or necklace, by sleeping with dwarfs in order to outwit a cunning Loki who is Odin’s liege man. Whereas *Sörla tháttir* seems like a mythic-heroic saga, *Thidrandi tháttir ok Thórhalls* shares the setting of the Sagas of Icelanders and presents some of the evidence regarding the *ðísir*, female spirits.

Not all the important source material is from Iceland or even in the vernacular. An extremely important source is *Gesta Danorum*, a Danish history written by the priest Saxo Grammaticus (that is, “the Grammarian”). Little is known about Saxo, other than that he came from a family of warriors, probably in Jutland, and that he was a member of the household of Absalon, who was archbishop of Lund from 1178–1201. Some of the *Gesta* seems to have been written before the death of Absalon; the rest was probably completed after 1216, or in other words, just a few years before Snorri began his mythological project. Saxo’s history consists of 16 books, of which the first 8 treat pagan Denmark and the

second 8, Christian Denmark. The first books are therefore, like *Ynglinga saga*, set in prehistory, and gods and heroes play a major role that continues down through the ninth book. Saxo offered a theory of euhemerism similar to that of Snorri, for he says in book 1 that Odin was a man falsely believed to be a god. Höd has become a human king, but Baldr is a demigod, and sometimes Saxo seems to be far more interested in the narratives he is recounting than in any theory of euhemerism. Saxo tells us he got some of his materials from Icelanders, and these materials probably sounded rather like the mythic-heroic sagas. The mythic-heroic sagas are prose with interspersed verse, and Saxo adorns his Latin prose with verse, often rather ornate but still thought to be translated from Scandinavian originals.

Certainly the versions of the myths he presents often vary widely from the versions we have from Iceland. To use the example of Baldr's death: In Saxo's version, Baldr and Höd are not brothers but rivals for the hand of Nanna, a human beauty. Höd is not blind—indeed, he is a most accomplished fellow. Neither Loki nor Frigg appears in the story, and there is no mistletoe. No attempt is made to restore Baldr from the world of the dead, and he enjoys only an attenuated funeral. Saxo's story adds some odd forest maidens and some magic food and sets the death of Baldr in the context of several pitched battles between the forces of Baldr and Höd. Yet Saxo's version does include disquieting dreams, Baldr's invulnerability, and, perhaps most important, the linked story of the siring of an avenger by Odin on Rind (Rinda in Saxo). The extent to which the variation between Saxo's version and the Icelandic sources represents differences between Danish and Icelandic traditions, as opposed to variation within Icelandic tradition reported to Saxo, has never been fully sorted out and probably never will be.

Besides these and a host of other written sources, from inside and outside Scandinavia and in languages ranging from English to Arabic, there are valuable nonwritten sources. Of these the most important is surely the archaeological record. We have, for example, numerous representations from the Viking Age of the encounter between Thor and the Midgard serpent, from Scandinavia and also from England. We have numerous small hammer-shaped amulets, which must be representations in the human world of the protective power conferred by Thor's hammer. We even have dies for casting such hammers and for casting Christian crosses, an eloquent piece of testimony to the mission and conversion. Some small objects with human form have been interpreted as representations of various gods in sculpture. Although these carvings and objects are understood by application of the texts, archaeologists are quite confident in their identifications, and our understanding of Scandinavian mythology would be less rich without them. Some adventurous scholars have even attempted to work from archaeological artifacts back to the mythology, for example, by using the illustrations on



*Soapstone mold for making both Thor's hammer and the Christian cross. (National Museum of Denmark)*

Migration Period bracteates (small brooches) to reconstruct a set of hypothetical myths about Odin as a healing god.

An example of the importance of the text-object relationship is the large number of small pieces of stamped gold foil that are increasingly being unearthed in apparent cult contexts from Viking Age sites in Scandinavia. Sometimes these portray a man and woman, but there is no direct connection to any text. These fascinating objects belong to the study of the history of religion, but not yet to the study of Scandinavian mythology.

Finally, in discussing the sources of our knowledge of Scandinavian mythology, I must mention etymology (the study of the origin and historical development of words), especially in the study of place-names. Etymology can help us understand the original nature of a god by asking about the meaning of the name of a god in Proto-Germanic, the language of the Germanic peoples around the start of our era, or in Proto-Indo-European, the parent language of Proto-Germanic. Neither of these languages has left any texts, and what we know of them is reconstructed by linguists. For example, according to linguists, the name "Odin," medieval Icelandic Óðinn, derives from a word that would mean something like "leader of the possessed." We cannot be sure what Týr's name meant



*Stamped gold foil from Norway depicts embracing figures. (Historisk Museum, Bergen Universitetet)*

in Proto-Germanic, but in Proto-Indo-European it was probably a word for “god” or “sky.” This may suggest that Týr is an older god than Odin, but such a surmise hardly helps us to understand texts recorded more than a millennium after Proto-Germanic was theoretically spoken and more than two millennia after Proto-Indo-European was spoken. And although it is instructive that Odin’s name originally may have meant “leader of the possessed,” we cannot assume that Viking Age or later Scandinavians were aware of that fact, and even if we knew they were aware of it, we would still use that fact only as one detail in building up a complete interpretation of Odin.

Most of the place-names of Scandinavia are very old, and over time they have changed enough that only etymology can recover the original meaning. Thus, for example, Copenhagen (Danish København) originally meant “merchants’ harbor.” Not a few place-names originally contained the names of gods, and the distribution in time and space of these names can tell us much. Nearly all of these theophoric (referring to a deity) names are compounds, in which the name of the god is followed by a noun referring to a natural or cultural feature of the landscape. For example, there are several places in Denmark called “Torshøj,” “Thor’s hill,” and the major city of the Danish island Fyn is Odense, which originally meant “Odin’s holy place.” Scholars usually distinguish “nature-names” from “cult-names,” but the distinction is not as clear as the previous pair of words suggests.

## **THE INDO-EUROPEAN BACKGROUND**

The Germanic languages, of which English, German, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages are the modern representatives, constitute one branch of the Indo-European family of languages. The name “Indo-European” was coined when the family relationship between Sanskrit, the classic literary language of India, and Greek and Latin, the classic literary languages of Europe, was discovered in the eighteenth century. Most of the languages of modern Europe fall into the Indo-European category, which includes the Germanic, Romance (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Romanian), Slavic (Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian), Celtic (Irish, Welsh, Manx, and Breton), and Baltic (Lithuanian, Latvian) groups. Finnish and Hungarian are the two national languages of Europe that are not Indo-European; Sámi and Basque represent two other non-Indo-European languages spoken in modern Europe.

Language branches (like Germanic) and families (like Indo-European) are reconstructed on the basis of careful comparison of sounds, words, and grammatical forms. Only such comparison makes possible the etymological research

I discussed above. Going on the assumption that shared language meant shared culture, scholars also tried cultural comparison, and one area in which such comparison was common in the nineteenth century was myth and religion. But although persons who studied comparative mythology were extremely erudite, they did not apply the same rigor to this subject as was used in comparative linguistics. The goal of linguistic comparison was reconstruction of a given language at an earlier state; similarly, comparative mythology hoped to lead to reconstruction of older states of a mythology or, in the Indo-European area, of the myths and conceptions of the hypothetical ancestors of the Indic, Germanic, and other Indo-European peoples from around 2,000 years ago. The project was doomed from the start, however, by notions of what myths were about. Few people thought that a particular sound “meant” something in and of itself. That is, for example, the sound that turned up as *ç* in Sanskrit, *c* [= *k*] in Latin, and *h* in Germanic was not thought to be anything other than the reflection of a *k* in Proto-Indo-European, a sound whose meaning was always arbitrary. In myth, however, the situation was quite different. Comparative mythology in the nineteenth century was above all a field driven by interpretations of myths as reflections of natural phenomena, primarily involving the sun, moon, fire, storms, and so forth. This nature mythology was taken as a kind of given, and bits and pieces of myths from all over the world were put to its service. There was no way to test the theory, since even if a bit of mythological lore was taken from a living people, nobody bothered to ask them what they thought it meant, and in fact the comparative method allowed one to ignore living beings, since change could have obscured the original meaning of something.

Although Adalbert Kuhn was an important early adherent of nature mythology, the person most closely associated with it today is Max Müller, a German Indo-Europeanist resident in England who was widely read and very influential for the entire second half of the nineteenth century. Müller’s theory of myth was actually based on the notion of a “disease of language,” the idea that language itself was inadequate to express everything it had to and therefore was a major contributor to the development of gods and myths, which grew out of linguistic confusion. Müller was an ardent solar mythologist (one who thought that nearly all myths were symbolic stories about the rising and setting sun, light and darkness, and the seasons), and he had followers who were even more ardent than he, if less learned. The indiscriminate aligning of narrative elements to natural phenomena led to the eventual discrediting of comparative mythology, not least when Andrew Lang, a critic of Max Müller, demonstrated that Müller himself was a solar myth.

The discrediting of nature mythology coincided with the growth of anthropology based on field observation in a single culture, and the result was the



demise of comparative mythology in the early part of the twentieth century. But Georges Dumézil, the great comparativist, began his academic career at the same time, trained by the Indo-European linguist Antoine Meillet but influenced by the sociologists Marcel Mauss and Émile Durkheim. Dumézil, unlike most of his linguistically trained predecessors, compared structure, not etymology, and he was quite prepared to argue that two deities in different Indo-European traditions were equivalent even when they had no etymological relationship whatever. Nor was he the least bit interested in potential reflection of the phenomena of nature. Rather, he thought that three social “functions” were represented in the mythologies of the various Indo-European peoples. The first function was that of sovereignty, which, according to Dumézil, is ordinarily represented by two deities, each of whom is associated with one or the other side of sovereignty: either with the awe inspired by a leader or with the legal, contractual nature that a sovereign was obligated to uphold. The classic split was found in the Vedic god Varuna and the Persian god Mithra; in Norse mythology, Dumézil argued, Odin represented the awesome side and Týr the legal or contractual side of sovereignty. The second function was might or force, and in Norse mythology Thor fulfilled that function. The third function was fertility, and here the deities are often doubled, as are Frey and Freyja. At one time Dumézil thought these functions represented actual social classes in proto-Indo-European society, but later he backed away from this notion and was content to argue for the structure on a purely mythological plane.

A second aspect of the Dumézilian theory involved the “displacement of myth,” that is, the idea that a mythic structure could be “displaced” to the level of divine heroes or in some cases historical fictions. In the Scandinavian area, Dumézil’s most forceful argument for such displacement involved the prehistoric king Hadingus, who had many aspects, according to Dumézil, but who also enacted in his life and career all three functions.

Until the late 1950s or early 1960s Dumézil was little known outside France, but thereafter scholars in many fields began to acquaint themselves with his huge output of scholarly writings, and translations of his work began to appear. It was probably inevitable that with such an ambitious project covering so much territory, there would errors at the most specialized level, and in Norse mythology, as in other areas, part of the initial reaction was to point these out. Other critics noted that a tripartite division of the sort Dumézil proposed was relatively common and therefore might have little explanatory power. In medieval Christian Europe, for example, the theory of society involved a division into priest, warriors, and laborers, and that could hardly be an Indo-European inheritance. Even so, the Dumézilian apparatus is by now so widespread that every student of an Indo-European mythology must be aware of it.

Dumézil was not the only person in the twentieth century to seek the Indo-European background of the mythology of one of the daughter traditions, and many contributions have been made outside his theoretical focus. In Norse mythology, study of Thor has especially profited from a look at such figures as the Vedic god Indra and Baltic thunder gods.

## CULT, WORSHIP, AND SACRIFICE

This is a book about myths (narratives), not religion (here defined as ritual practice), and as I explained above, few of the narratives were composed during the pagan period and virtually none was recorded then. This makes any study of the cult and ritual that Norse mythology might have accompanied a tricky matter indeed. Nevertheless, we do have some information.

Discussions of the ritual practices associated with Norse mythology usually begin with descriptions by Roman writers of the Germanic peoples, and this is justifiable because the gods we know from our mythological texts also left traces in such forms as the names of the days of the week (see the entry *Interpretatio Germanica* in chapter 3).

The foremost witness is the *Germania* of Tacitus, from the last years of the first century C.E. Tacitus describes several ritual acts carried out by various Germanic tribes, of which the most famous is surely the worship of the goddess Nerthus described in chapter 40 of his *Germania*. Nerthus, Mother Earth, covered by a cloth, is transported in a cart drawn by cows and accompanied by a priest who recognizes when she is present. This procession takes place in a holy grove on the island on which she lives, and all weapons are laid aside on the days on which it takes place, which are ones of peace and quiet. After the procession, everything is washed in the ocean by slaves who are then drowned.

A number of the aspects of this ceremony agree with what scholars think they know about cult and ritual of the Germanic peoples. Tacitus says elsewhere—and other sources, including place-names, agree—that worship occurs in a sacred grove. The killing of the slaves might also be regarded as a form of sacrifice, a subject to which I will return shortly. Other aspects of the worship of Nerthus find striking agreement with texts recorded much later that are associated specifically with the *vanir*. Freyja's cart is pulled by cats, and according to *Ögmundar tháttr dytts*, admittedly a late text, (an idol of) Frey is pulled about in a cart accompanied by an attendant, female in this case. Fródi, who shares many characteristics with Frey, was also pulled in a cart, and a time of great peace and prosperity was associated with both Frey and Fródi.

Although there does not seem to have been a separate priestly class, the

term *goði*, as suggested above, implies a religious function for the leaders of Icelandic society before the conversion to Christianity. As a Roman, Tacitus used the vocabulary of his own era and therefore called the man who accompanied Nerthus a “priest,” but he could easily have been something like a *goði*, a person of status and a secular leader on the days when the goddess was not present. It is the “*goði*” who notices when the goddess is present, and unlike the slaves, he survives to preside over the ceremonies another day. Most or all cults must have been of this nature, led by the chieftain when public ritual was enacted and by the head of household in the case of private ritual. Many historians of religion have argued for a close connection between law, society, and religion, and this connection would be embodied in the men who presided over secular and sacred affairs.

Although Tacitus says the Germanic peoples worshipped in the open, the notion of pagan temples is common in many of the later sources. This probably marks both a change in paganism, perhaps as building techniques changed, and the influence of Christian (and also pagan Roman) worship. In the northern reaches of Scandinavia, the Sámi people seem to have retained an open-air priestless paganism, and they were far from such influences. The eddic poems have references to the building of places of worship (e.g., the “high-timbered” altar and temple of *Völuspá*, stanza 7), and there is one very explicit description of a pagan temple in *Eyrbyggja saga*, which shows, if nothing else, where a thirteenth-century Icelander thought his pagan ancestors had worshipped three centuries earlier. Adam of Bremen’s account of the pagan temple at Uppsala, mentioned above, is difficult to discount, but it must be remembered that the end of the eleventh century, when Adam was writing, was a time of enormous Christian influence in Sweden, and it is quite conceivable that the notion of a building reserved for religious purposes could have resulted from such influence. Scandinavian pagans had probably much earlier come in out of the rain for their religious ceremonies: Scholars now agree that large homesteads were the sites of cult activities as well as of other social activities.

The sources mention something called a *hörgr*, which I have translated “altar” in this book. The eddic poems suggest the *hörgr* was something that could be rededicated, and they make it appear to be some sort of altar, at least in the sense that sacrifices were made upon it. Etymologically the word seems to have to do with stones or rocks, and it is not difficult to imagine the Germanic *hörgr* as a pile of rocks in a sacred grove; the Old High German cognate is in fact sometimes found with the meaning “sacred rock” and sometimes with the meaning “sacred grove.”

Tacitus says the Germanic peoples did not produce images of their gods. Adam of Bremen says the pagan temple at Uppsala had idols of Thor, Wodan (Odin), and Fricco (Frey). Again, the difference lies in the millennium that passed between the times the two authors wrote, and probably also to some extent in

the influence of other models. Certainly medieval Scandinavians believed that their pagan forbears had worshipped idols, for they routinely put idols in their historical writings. In the Sagas of Icelanders, the expression “the gods” almost always refers to idols, and when Icelanders translated the lives of the Christian saints, they sometimes attached the names of their own pagan gods to the idols worshipped by the pagans whom the early saints encountered.

The word used for pagan cult activity is *blót*. The etymology is disputed, and that is a pity, for if we could recover the original meaning of the word we would at least know something of the origin and perhaps nature of the activity among the Germanic or pre-Germanic peoples. The two credible suggestions are that *blót* is related to Latin *flamen*, “priest of a specific deity,” from a root meaning ultimately something like “sacrificial activity,” or to a root meaning “to make strong,” ultimately deriving from a root meaning “swollen.” The first has the advantage of being associated with religious activity, but it does not tell us much about the actual conception. Far more important are the loans of *blót* into Finnish, namely *luote*, “magic charm,” and Sámi *luotte*, “magic song.” These show us the importance of verbal activity at a *blót*, specifically verbal activity aimed at producing a result, presumably by means of intervention by the deities.

Another way to influence the deities was of course to make sacrifices to them, and here we have an ample record to draw on. Bogs, wells, lakes, and the earth have yielded such objects as broken weapons, which can only be interpreted as gifts to the gods after battle. Classical sources report that the Germanic peoples killed their defeated enemies rather than take them prisoner, again as a form of sacrifice, and Adam of Bremen says that every ninth year at the pagan temple at Uppsala, sacrifices of all kinds of creatures took place, including humans. But the most important sacrifices at the *blót* were surely animals that were slaughtered and eaten, presumably in some form of honor of a god.

In chapter 8 of his *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri Sturluson says that Odin established the succession of *blót* ceremonies in the north. Toward winter (i.e., in fall) there should be a *blót* for prosperity; at midwinter, one for the growth of the soil; and at summer, a third one, the victory-*blót*. There is an evident connection here, as one would expect, with the rhythm of the year: The fall ceremony would occur after the last harvest was in, and the animals slaughtered would be those who were not to survive the winter. Some of their meat could be eaten fresh at the *blót*, but much would be preserved for winter. The midwinter *blót* would occur after the longest nights had passed and would celebrate the rebirth of the earth; and the summer ceremony, if it was for victory, would coincide with the departure of ships on raiding (and, more mundanely, trading) voyages.

Later in his *Heimskringla*, in *Hákonar saga góða* (The Saga of Hákon the Good), Snorri gives an elaborate description of a *blót* that shows just how perva-

sive the influence of Christian liturgy was on the view of late Nordic paganism of Snorri and other Icelandic intellectuals. The word *hlaut* is cognate with English “lot,” as in “to cast lots.” I cannot find a reasonable translation, so I have left it in the original.

It was the ancient custom, when a *blót* was to be held, that all farmers should come to where the temple was, and to transport there the supplies they would need as long as the banquet lasted. At the banquet everyone was to drink beer. All sorts of cattle and horses were killed there, and all the blood that came from them was called *hlaut*, and the vessels in which it stood *hlaut*-bowls, and the *hlaut*-twigs were made like an aspergillum [a brush used to sprinkle holy water in Catholic liturgy]. With it one was to redden the pedestal together with the walls of the temple inside and out and also to sprinkle it on the people, while the meat of the slaughtered animals was to be cooked for people to enjoy. . . . A tankard was to be carried to the fire, and the one who made the banquet and was the chieftain should bless the tankard and all the sacrificial meat and should first toast Odin—that should be drunk for victory and for the kingdom of his king—and after that a toast to Njörd and Frey for peace and prosperity. Then people were eager to drink the *bragafull* [chieftain’s toast] next. People also drank a toast to their kinsmen who had been buried in mounds; that was called *minni* [memorial].

Take away the references to the gods and the blood spattered all about, and one might well have a picture of a wealthy man’s feast in medieval Norway or Iceland.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SCANDINAVIAN MYTHOLOGY**

Although worship of the Scandinavian gods ended a thousand years ago, and the myths are now exotic and foreign to most people in the English-speaking world, we make implicit reference to the gods and myths almost every day of our lives. That is because the names of the weekdays Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday all contain the names of old Scandinavian gods (Týr, Odin, Thor, and Frigg; the Old English forms were Tiw, Wodæn, Thunor, and Friija), and the choice of the gods for each of these days was based on myths about them. (I treat the subject at greater length in the entry on Interpretatio Germanica in chapter 3.) Furthermore, when we read about or travel in places like Odense, Denmark (probably best known outside Denmark as the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen), we see a place-name that once bore the name of the god Odin. There are hundreds of these in Scandinavia, but they are seldom obvious, except in Ice-

land, where there are places with names like Þórsmörk (Thor's forest), a favorite place for hiking and camping. And if you are acquainted with or have heard of anyone called Freyja, Thor, Baldur (a not uncommon name in Iceland), or any Scandinavian name beginning with Tor, you know of the persistence of the names of the gods in personal naming systems.

The era when Norse mythology was most known in more recent times was the Romantic period, when the gods and myths were a popular source of inspiration. Paul Henri Mallet's *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, ou l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des moeurs, et des usages des anciens danois* (Copenhagen: Berling, 1755) made Norse mythology widely known for the first time in a world language, and the work was translated into English in 1770 as *Northern Antiquities: Or, A Description of The Manners, Customs, Religion, and Laws of The Ancient Danes, and Other Northern Nations; Including Those of Our Own Saxon Ancestors. With a Translation of The Edda, Or System of Runic Mythology, and Other Pieces, from The Ancient Icelandic Tongue* (London: T. Carnan and Co., 1770). The translator was Bishop Percy, who is famous for his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, a collection of ballads and other pieces that was one of the most influential works of English Romanticism. The second volume of Mallet contained a translation of the mythological stories of Snorri's *Edda*, in a late arrangement done by Magnús Ólafsson, parson at Laufás in the early seventeenth century and therefore known as the Laufás *Edda*. It was at the end of the eighteenth century, too, that translations of eddic poetry began to appear in the European languages. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Norse mythology was the vogue, especially in Germany and Scandinavia, and many of the famous Romantic poets reworked stories from Norse mythology into drama or verse. Romantic painters also found inspiration in the Norse myths.

In a way the ultimate result of this Romantic interest in Norse myth and heroic legend was the opera cycle by the German composer Richard Wagner entitled *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung). This mighty work, originally intended to be heard over the course of just three days, consists of a prologue called *Das Rheingold* (The Rhine-gold), followed by three hefty three-act operas, *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods). Wagner wrote the book as well as the music, using a kind of alliterative, archaic German that has its own strange charm, at least when sung. He based his story loosely on the so-called Burgundian cycle, that is, the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* centering on Sigurd, *Völsunga saga*, and the medieval German epic *Das Nibelungenlied* (The Song of the Nibelungs). The major action of the first part of the cycle Wagner took from the story that prefaces *Reginsmál* in the *Poetic Edda*, involving a cursed ring that the gods obtain and must give

up. Although many of the gods make only small appearances, Odin, called either Wotan (the German form of his name) or the Wanderer, plays an absolutely pivotal role. He leaves the stage at the end of the second act of *Die Walküre*, but Walhalla, the abode of the gods, is seen crumbling at the end of *Götterdämmerung* as the Rhine overflows its banks and cleanses the world of the cursed ring. It is powerful music and powerful theater.

Wagner was one of Hitler's favorite composers, and Norse mythology had a sad revival in connection with Nazi ideology. Today Norse mythology every once in a while is found in connection with contemptible neo-Nazi activities, but for the most part it is the stuff of either comic books or fantasy literature. There was a revival of "belief in the æsir" some years ago in Iceland, which seemed to have to do at least in part with tax breaks for organized religion, although partying is also important. That revival had its counterpart in Norway, where a group of students announced themselves to be believers in the æsir. In celebration, they drank some beer and sacrificed a sausage.

## THE NATURE OF MYTHIC TIME

**R**eligions of the world experience and encode time in various ways: as a linear progression, as a never-ending set of cycles, as a process of degeneration, and so forth. We are most used to a linear system, since it characterizes our Judeo-Christian tradition, which sees a clear progression from the creation of the world through a long present leading to a last time, a day of judgment, an end of history. Similarly, our science gives us increasing detail concerning the origin of the entire universe. We live in the long aftermath of the big boom and the origin of our solar system, and we know that in due course our sun will die. In a cyclical system, however, such a linear progression repeats itself endlessly; each end is followed by a new beginning. Determining the time system of Scandinavian mythology presents special challenges because many of the sources were recorded by Christians, whose notion of time was linear and whose notion of history called for an essentially clear chronology. This is especially so of Snorri Sturluson, whose *Edda* is the clearest and most appealing account of the mythology to modern readers. It must not be forgotten that Snorri was also a historian, the author or compiler of a history of the Norwegian kings (*Heimskringla*) arranged wholly chronologically. The other great overview of the mythology is the eddic poem *Völuspá*. Although nearly all scholars agree that it dates from the pagan period, most would assign it to late paganism, and Christian influence seems apparent. Even so, *Völuspá* seems to show traces of a cyclic arrangement of time as well as a linear arrangement.

Furthermore, the various myths present direct contradictions of relative chronology. Such contradiction is, however, characteristic of myth, which has its own rules. Within Scandinavian mythology, these rules appear to suggest a fairly consistent ordering of events within a given narrative, but no requirement whatever that events within the mythology as a whole can be fit into a precise order. Examples will be cited below, but anyone who confronts the primary sources or even a summary of the mythology will easily identify others.



## MYTHIC PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The mythology as a whole may be divided into events that take place in the past, present, and future, an idea that is expressed in the meanings of the names of the norms Urd, "Became" or "Happened"; Verdandi, "Becoming" or "Happening"; and Skuld, "Is-to-be" or "Will-happen." However, it is convenient to make further distinctions.

The *distant past* would involve the period before the creation of the universe. At that time there was only Ginnunga gap, the vast void of potency and potential, and perhaps also the Élivágar, mysterious waters from which life was to emerge. We must assign Ymir to this distant past, and also his hermaphroditic generation of the races of giants. Similarly, Bur, the first of the gods, existed at this time.

The focus of the *near past* would be the creation of the cosmos, from the body of Ymir according to most sources. The precondition for forming the cosmos was the killing of Ymir by the sons of Bur, so we may say that the movement from the distant past to the near past encompasses a move from a stasis between the two major groups of gods to a state of enmity. During this near past the gods also enabled the reckoning of time by assigning stations to the heavenly bodies (*Völuspá*, stanza 5), and they similarly enabled culture by creating tools (*Völuspá*, stanza 7). They created the races of dwarfs and humans. Finally, I would assign the incorporation of the vanir and of Loki into the æsir as the final events of the near past.

With the completion of these incorporations, the mythological world looks as it does in most of the myths. Snorri's catalog of the gods in *Gylfaginning* includes the vanir and Loki, and also Baldr, whose death is yet to come. I would call this state the *mythological present*, the time when most of the myths take place. Although it hardly matters whether a given myth of the mythological present occurs before or after some other myth, certain events do seem to have to precede or follow others. For example, when in *Skáldskaparmál* of Snorri's *Edda* the gods wish to appease Skadi for the killing of her father Thjazi, they offer her a choice of husband among the gods, letting her select based on an observation of just their lower legs. She chooses what she thinks are Baldr's but ends up with old Njörd. According to the reasoning of this narrative, then, Njörd's marriage to Skadi preceded the death of Baldr. However, Frey's marriage to Gerd appears to have followed Baldr's death. In *Skírnismál*, stanza 21, Skírnir offers the giantess Gerd "the ring which was burned with the young son of Odin," and this can only be Draupnir. If it was burned with the son of Odin, Baldr must already be dead, and Frey and Gerd's marriage has yet even to be arranged, much less consummated after the nine nights that must intervene after the arrangement is made. I

think Snorri must have had this sequence of events in mind when he wrote *Gylfaginning*, for in the catalog of gods he says that Njörd is married to Skadi, but he does not say that Frey is married to Gerd. And following this chronology, we might assume that Baldr was, in Snorri's mind, already dead when the gods visited Ægir at the very beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, for he includes Gerd in the guest list. However, we must take care with such assumptions. In the case of this guest list, for example, Baldr is indeed absent, but Nanna is present. Either she did not after all cast herself on Baldr's funeral pyre, as Snorri says she did in *Gylfaginning*, or the chronology will not hold. Such inconsistencies are, let me stress, not causes for worry. They are in the nature of mythology.

Similarly, we may think of events as occurring relatively early or relatively late in the mythological present. An example of a relatively early event would be the acquisition of the mead of poetry. The mead was in the first place created as a result of the conclusion of hostilities between æsir and vanir and is a token of the incorporation of the two groups. It is one of Odin's most powerful weapons in the ongoing struggle with the jötnar. Similarly, the construction of the wall around the stronghold of the gods, told most fully in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, is a story of the early mythological present. It explains not only how a wall gets built around Valhöll (which is mentioned in several myths, e.g., Odin's interaction with Hrungrnir and Loki's rescue of Idun), but also how Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, is created. Here again, strict chronological consistency is lacking, for the account of the acquisition of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál* implies the existence of the wall (the gods put the kettles for it in the enclosure), but the incorporation of the æsir and vanir, which is the precondition for the mead, occurred in the near past. Another story of the early mythological present would be Odin's sending of Hel to the underworld and the Midgard serpent to the outer waters of the ocean, as well as the binding of the wolf Fenrir, when Týr lost his hand. In the mythological present Hel presides over the underworld, Thor fishes up the Midgard serpent in offshore waters, and Týr is without his hand, while Fenrir awaits the end of the world.

Odin's myths tend toward the early part of the mythic present: Already mentioned are the mead of poetry, war and peace with the vanir, oath of blood-brotherhood with Loki, and disposition of Loki's children. In addition there is Odin's self-sacrifice, which gained him much of the rest of the wisdom he uses in the mythological present. Odin myths in the mythological present would include in particular the stories of his visits with the giant Vafthrúdnir and the human king Geirröd, in each of which wisdom plays an important role.

Nearly all of the Thor myths take place in the undifferentiated mythic present. These include, besides his fishing up of the Midgard serpent, his encounters with Hrungrnir, Hymir, and Geirröd.

Some events must be fairly late in the mythological present, and the foremost of these is the death of Baldr. As the first death among the gods, it changed all the terms of the game. Even if it did not make Ragnarök inevitable, it made it possible, for now the death of any and therefore of all the gods is a possibility. If we follow the Baldr story in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, we see that Odin's strategy of swearing blood-brotherhood with Loki has failed, for it was Loki who brought about Baldr's death. The gods now bind Loki, and like his sons the wolf Fenrir and the Midgard serpent, he awaits Ragnarök, the end of the world and the final period in the mythology. Many of the events in the mythic present look forward to Ragnarök: the failed oath of blood-brotherhood, the binding of evil creatures, and the gathering of einherjar, the chosen warriors of Odin, at Valhöll.

The mythic future also has two stages. In the *near future* is Ragnarök, when the power of the gods over the jötnar characteristic of the mythic present will be reversed. Surt will lead the forces of chaos against the gods, who will fall. The creative activities of the near past will be undone: Time reckoning will fail as the sun and moon are swallowed and the heavens destroyed, and the entire cosmos will be consumed by flames and water. Each of the major gods will die in individual combat with a giant adversary, but Odin, at least, will be avenged, by his son Vídar, the silent god, and this vengeance constitutes a bridge to the distant future, the period after Ragnarök when the second-generation gods Vídar and Váli, Magni and Móði, and, perhaps most important, Baldr and Höd, victim and killer, will inhabit the renewed earth. They will possess the cultural property of their ancestors in the form of oral traditions about them as well as in the concrete form of the gaming pieces *Völuspá*, stanza 61, says they will find in the grass. This paradise will be fertile and devoid of jötnar.

As I have thus outlined it, the overall chronology of Scandinavian mythology is neatly symmetrical. The early present looks back to the near past, just as the later present looks forward directly to the near future. The creative work of the near past is undone in the near future, but the vicious relationship between gods and jötnar, which enabled the creation of the cosmos and led to its destruction, is gone in the distant future, just as it was not present in the distant past. But there has still been a progression: In the distant past there was no cosmos, but in the distant future there is a green world with birds and fertile fields. The course of the mythology has indeed led to a better world.

## CYCLICAL TIME

*Völuspá*, stanza 4, states that the creating gods lifted up the earth, and the poem is silent on the killing of Ymir. These facts could imply that when the earth

arose from the sea after Ragnarök later in the poem, there was a cyclical notion at work. In other words, the cosmos might be formed and reformed on multiple occasions by rising from the sea. This notion, which accords with the theories of Mircea Eliade as expressed, for example, in his *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, has been expressed most clearly by Jens Peter Schjødt in his 1981 article “Völuspá—cyklisk tidsopfattelse i gammelnordisk religion” (*Danske studier* 76 [1981]: 91–95). Schjødt points especially to the last stanza of *Völuspá*, which refers to the arrival of a dragon and the sinking of the sibyl. In the best treatment of time in Norse mythology, that of Margaret Clunies Ross in volume 1 of her *Prolonged Echoes*, especially chapter 7, Clunies Ross accepts the possibility of underlying traces of cyclic time but offers a linear progression very similar to the one I have outlined here, the differences being that I split the mythic present into periods of early, undifferentiated, and late, and also that I demonstrate the symmetries of the chronology and their implications.

## TIME AND SPACE

Clunies Ross also discusses the relationship between time and space that characterized the structural analyses of Eleazar Meletinskij, “Scandinavian Mythology as a System,” *The Journal of Structural Anthropology* 1 (1973): 43–58, and 2 (1974): 57–78, and Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Assessment of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). Both these authors sought to distinguish the vertical from the horizontal axes, the first manifesting itself in the world tree linking heaven and the underworld, and the second, in the disk of the earth on which Ásgard, Midgard, and the worlds of the giants are located. Meletinskij argued that cosmogony and eschatology were distinguished by the axes and that this distinction had a chronological aspect. Hastrup described the difference as one of reversibility: Events on the vertical axis were “irreversible,” for they were fated; those on the horizontal axis were “reversible,” in that the balance between gods and giants was so close. Both Clunies Ross and Jens Peter Schjødt, “Horizontale und vertikale Achsen in der vorchristlichen skandinavischen Kosmologie,” in *Old Norse and Finnish Cultic Religions and Place Names*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck, Scripta Instituti Donneri Aboensis, 13 (Åbo, Finland: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), 35–57, disagreed. Schjødt takes on the notion of the “eschatological” or “irreversible” nature of the vertical axis and argues that it has cyclical aspects. Clunies Ross argues that events on the horizontal axis (those that for the most part fall into the mythic present) are hardly reversible even in Hastrup’s model, for they contribute directly to eschatology

(put another way: the mythic present always looks back to the past and forward to the future).

## MYTH, NARRATIVE, AND LANGUAGE

The situation is further complicated by two other factors. The first is the “immanence” of the mythology: The entire system is implicit in any of its details, and a myth is equally present in a kenning or an allusive skaldic poem from the pagan period, and neither of these requires any kind of chronology but, instead, implies a kind of simultaneity of myth. The second is a linguistic after-effect and may be presented here by discussing stanza 28 of *Lokasenna*. Frigg has just admonished Loki.

You know, if here I had in Ægir’s hall  
A son like Baldr  
Away you would never get from the sons of the æsir,  
And you would be struck down in anger.

Loki’s response is a boast about his role in the slaying of Baldr. The second half of stanza 28 goes literally as follows.

I arrange it, that you never see  
Baldr afterwards ride up to the hall anymore.

Most translators render the first three words as something like “I am responsible,” and indeed the present tense of the verb might be understood that way. Conceivably it might also be read literally as a progressive: “I am arranging,” that is, I’m taking care of that right now. But in medieval Icelandic the simple present tense also is used for the future, so Loki may be saying “I will arrange it.” And although the word is quite clear in the one manuscript retaining the poem, the difference between present and past tense is just the vowel, and some editors have chosen to print the past tense rather than the present tense. In other words, when Loki was insulting all the gods, he had killed Baldr, was planning it, or would take care of it later.

The same linguistic fact complicates our understanding of other texts. In *Völuspá*, for example, the seeress who speaks the poem says in one manuscript that she *saw* various events connected with Ragnarök (in the other she says she uses the present tense, as one would expect of a vision of the mythic future, as the frame of the poem implies). But around stanza 44 she begins to use the present tense. Is she situated toward the onset of Ragnarök?

## MYTH AND HISTORY

For the Christians of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, the gods would have had a place in historical time both through their euhemerization and through their presence in some of the lives of the saints translated from Latin into Icelandic. According to the notion of the euhemerization that prevailed in medieval Iceland, the gods were originally human beings who had emigrated from the Middle East (Tyrkland) to Scandinavia long ago. They would have left their homeland at some point during the Roman Empire, which can be reckoned to around 100 B.C.E. Both Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus associate the legendary king Fródi, grandson of Frey according to Snorri, with the peace that occurred when Christ was on earth. And the translated lives of the saints put the Norse gods (in place of Jupiter, Mars, Diana, and other Roman gods) in the time and space of early Christianity—even if they are only for the most part envisioned in these texts as idols animated by demons.

It is furthermore possible—perhaps likely—that Ragnarök was seen by at least some Christians as the demise not only of the pagan gods but of the belief in and worship of them. Their day would have preceded that of Christ, and it had a fiery and perhaps well-deserved end. Certainly the famous stanza 65H of *Völuspá*, found in the late-fourteenth-century redaction of the text, supports such a possibility, for it mentions the coming to power of “the powerful one, from on high, he who rules all.” Whoever created this verse appears to have considered the world he and his fellow Christians lived in to be the new world that followed Ragnarök. The conversion to Christianity seems to have been envisioned while it was happening as a struggle between Thor and Christ. Thor and his fellow gods thus exited history at about the time Christ entered it in the north, that is, in the tenth and eleventh centuries.



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## DEITIES, THEMES, AND CONCEPTS

### ÆGIR

The sea personified; a famous host to the gods but listed among the *jötnar*.

The name appears to be identical to a noun for “sea” in skaldic poetry, and that noun, or the name of the figure under discussion here, is the base word in many kennings. For example, “Ægir’s horse” is a ship, and “daughters of Ægir” are waves. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri says that Rán is the wife of Ægir and that they have nine daughters, most of whom bear names meaning “wave.” Since Rán is listed among the goddesses in the *thulur* and Ægir has a peaceful relationship with the gods, his inclusion in the *thulur* as a giant seems questionable.

The eddic poems often show Ægir as host to the gods. *Hymiskvida* is set in motion because the gods expect to visit Ægir and will need a huge cauldron in which to brew the beer that will be consumed. The poem tells how Thor acquires the cauldron from the giant Hymir. The next poem in *Codex Riegus* of the *Poetic Edda* is *Lokasenna*, Loki’s flyting (that is, verbal duel) with the gods, and it is set at a feast hosted by Ægir. Indeed, paper manuscripts call the poem *Ægisdrekka* (Ægir’s Drinking Party). According to the prose header to the poem, “Ægir, who was also called Gymir, had prepared beer for the *æsir*.” After enumerating the guest list (most of the *æsir* except Thor, who was away to the east bashing trolls), the author reports that bright gold was used there in place of fire-light, and the beer served itself. It was a great place of sanctuary, but Loki kills Ægir’s servant Fimafeng, and Eldir, Ægir’s other servant, is the first with whom Loki exchanges words in the series of flytings that make up the poem. Loki’s last words are reserved for Ægir:

You made the beer, Ægir, and you never more will  
 Have a feast again;  
 All your possessions, which are here inside,  
 May fire play over,  
 And may it burn your back.



Ægir's prowess as a host is the final motif Odin reveals to the terrified King Geirröd in *Grímnismál* before beginning the list of names that leads to his epiphany. But Ægir was also a famous guest, according to Snorri. The frame story that he uses in the first sections of *Skáldskaparmál* begins with this introduction of Ægir:

A man was named Ægir or Hlér; he lived on that island which is now called Hlér's Island [modern Læssø in Denmark]. He had much magic knowledge. He made his way to Ásgard, but the æsir knew of his journey in advance. He was well received, but many things were done with illusions.

The similarities to *Gylfaginning* are remarkable, and they are only extended when Bragi, who is seated next to Ægir, begins to tell Ægir stories: the mythic narratives in *Skáldskaparmál*, beginning with the Thjazi-Idun-Skadi complex. Ægir asks questions after hearing this cycle, and more myths follow. The dialogue between Ægir the questioner and Bragi the narrator continues for many pages in *Skáldskaparmál* and is embedded in many of the myths that are recounted. After a time, speakers are not identified, but the dialogue form is carried on throughout *Skáldskaparmál*, and Ægir reappears as the subject in one of the questions concerning kennings: Why is gold called "fire of the sea" or "fire of Ægir"? The answer is what was found in the prose header to *Lokasenna*: Gold was used to light Ægir's hall when he entertained the æsir.

The beginning of *Orkneyinga saga* (The Saga of the Orkney Islanders) is sometimes called *Fundinn Noregr* (Norway Found), and it is closely related to a section of *Flateyjarbók* called *Hversu Noregr byggdisk* (How Norway Was Settled). It begins with a king called Fornjót, who ruled in northern Norway. "Fornjót had three sons. One was named Hlér, whom we call Ægir, the second Logi, the third Kári." Like *ægir*, *hlér* is a noun meaning "sea." The noun *logi* means "fire," and *kári* is listed among the *thulur* for "wind." Thus Ægir as a personification of the sea would appear to have been regarded as one of the three elements in a genealogical tradition that presumably was localized in Norway.

**See also** Ægir's Daughters; Fornjót; Rán

**References and further reading:** Matthias Tveitane, "Omkring det mytologiske navnet Ægir 'vannmannen,'" *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 31 (1976): 81–95 (summary in English), argues that the name of the being Ægir, which he understands as "water-man," was originally separate from the noun "mass of water, sea." Francis P. Magoun treated some place-names, including the name of Ægir, in "Fi feldor and the Name of the Eider," *Namn och bygd* 28 (1940): 91–114. Franz Rolf Schröder, "Die Göttin des Urmeeres und ihr männlicher Partner," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (Tübingen) 82 (1960): 221–264, is centered on Nerthus and Njörd but also

included discussion of Rán and Ægir/Hlér. Margaret Clunies Ross, "Snorri Sturluson's Use of the Norse Origin Legend of the Sons of Fornjótr in His *Edda*," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983): 47–66, analyzes Snorri's understanding of natural forces as giants.

### ÆGIR'S DAUGHTERS

The waves of the sea; nine sisters, daughters of Ægir and Rán.

Ægir is the sea personified, and his daughters are the waves. The poet known only as Svein, perhaps an Icelander of the eleventh century, describes a wintry storm in which gusts of wind from the mountains rattle and tear apart Ægir's daughters, that is, the waves. *Helgakvída Hundingsbana* I, stanza 29, calls a powerful wave that nearly overturns a ship Ægir's daughter. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson says that Rán is Ægir's wife and the mother of Ægir's daughters. Snorri lists their names twice, with a variation in the eighth name only: Himinglæfa (Transparent-on-top), Dúfa (Wave), Blóðudhadda (Bloody-hair), Hefring (Lifting), Unn (Wave), Hrönn (Wave), Bylgja (Billow), Kára (Powerful) or Dröfn (Wave), and Kólga (Cool-wave). The only one of these names whose appropriateness is not immediately apparent is "Bloody-hair," which I take to refer to reddish foam atop a wave.

*See also* Ægir

### ÆSIR

The gods; also the main group of gods, as opposed to the vanir.

The medieval Icelandic word *æsir* is a plural; the singular is *áss*, and a derived feminine form, *ásynja* (pl., *ásynjur*), means "goddess." Etymologically, *áss* appears to be derived from an Indo-European root meaning "breath," and this would suggest an association with life and life-giving forces. A dissenting etymology would understand the term as associated with sovereignty and "binding gods," parallel to the terms *bönd* and *höpt*. The term is found a few times in early runic inscriptions, and the cognate is found in Old English *os*, "god, deity," and in *anses*, "demigods," a Latinized version of a word in Gothic, the language of the well-known Germanic tribe. The word *áss*, or its homonym, also means "beam" or "post," and some scholars seek an association with wooden idols or the equivalent. The rune poems, which are relatively late, give *áss* or its equivalent as the name of the *a*-rune.

In medieval Icelandic the term *æsir* is the one most often found when the gods are being described as a group, in prose and in poetry. In *Thrymskvida*, for example, when it is revealed that Thor's hammer has been stolen by the giant Thrym and that he will exchange it only for Freyja, the poet writes:

Then all the æsir were at an assembly,  
And all the *ásynjur* in discussion. (stanza 14)

Often the term *álfar*, “elves,” is used as a parallel, probably because of the alliteration that the poetic form required, but also perhaps because of a fundamental association between the two groups. As she describes the world crumbling about them at Ragnarök, for example, the seeress of *Völuspá* asks: “What’s with the æsir, / what’s with the elves?” (stanza 48), a formula that is repeated in *Thrymskvida*, stanza 7. In the *Ljóðatal* section of *Hávamál*, Odin boasts that he can discern the difference between æsir and álfar (stanza 159) and adds that the fifteenth song he has learned was chanted by the dwarf Thjódörir, before the doors of Delling: “He chanted strength for the æsir, / advancement for the álfar, / and mind for Hroptatýr [Odin]” (stanza 160). The formulaic association of æsir and álfar is also found in *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál*, and *Lokasenna*.

Although the plural refers to all the gods, the singular seems to have a special association with Thor. Thus, when Thor tells Loki about the theft of the hammer early in *Thrymskvida*, he says: “The *áss* has had his hammer stolen” (stanza 2). Thor is called Ása-Thor (Thor of the æsir). No other god is described in this way, and it has been suggested that this extension of the name means that he was regarded as best of the æsir.

The most interesting use of the word *æsir* is that of Snorri Sturluson in the euhemerization project he set forth in the preface to his *Edda* and in the opening chapters of *Ynglinga saga*. *Ásía*, the Old Norse word for Asia, appeared to contain the word *áss*, although of course it does not, and Snorri used the sound similarity to suggest that the original meaning of *æsir* was “men of Asia.” Chapter 2 of *Ynglinga saga* begins as follows:

To the east of Tanakvísl [the river Don] in Asia was known as Ásaland [land of the æsir] or Ása-heimr [world of the æsir], and the principle stronghold in the land they called Ásgard.

Because of this usage, one must take care when reading Snorri’s *Edda*. When King Gylfi resolves to set off for his encounter with High, Equally-high, and Third, it is because he is curious about the knowledge and power of the Ása-folk, which must refer to “Asians”; the intended euhemerism may even explain Snorri’s choice of “Ása-folk,” which clearly retains the root of *Ásía*, here instead of “æsir.” In the frame to *Skáldskaparmál*, however, he just refers to the inhabitants of Ásgard as æsir, and there the ambiguity may be deliberate.

**See also** Æsir-Vanir War; Almáttki áss; Ása-Thor; Gods, Words for  
**References and further reading:** Andreas Heusler, *Die gelehrte Urgeschichte im*

*altisländischen Schrifttum*, Abhandlungen der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse; [Jahrg.] 1908, Abh. 3 (Berlin, Verlag der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, in Commission bei Georg Reimer, 1908). Waltraud Hunke, "Odins Geburt," in *Edda, Skalden, saga: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Felix Genzmer*, ed. Hermann Schneider (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1952), 68–71. Edgar Polomé, "L'étymologie du terme germanique \*ansuz 'dieu souverain,'" *Études germaniques* 8 (1953): 36–44. Albert Morey Sturtevant, "Regarding the Name Ása-Pórr," *Scandinavian Studies* 15 (1953): 15–16.

### ÆSIR-VANIR WAR

War fought at the beginning of time, leading by its truce to the incorporation of the æsir and vanir into a single unified group of gods.

We know the war from *Völuspá* and from Snorri's somewhat varying descriptions in the *Ynglinga saga* of his *Heimskringla* and in the *Skáldskaparmál* of his *Edda*. The sequence in *Völuspá* of stanzas 21–24 refers to the first battle in the world, and in stanza 24 both the æsir and vanir are mentioned. The seeress is speaking of herself in the third person:

21. She remembers the battle of armies, the first one in the world,  
When Gullveig with spears they studded  
And in the hall of Hár burned her;  
Thrice burned, thrice born,  
Often, unseldom, though she yet lives.
22. They called her Heid, where she came to [the?] houses,  
a seeress very wise, she cast spells;  
she performed seid where she could, she performed seid, in a trance,  
she was ever the joy of an evil woman.
23. Then all the powers went to the judgment seats  
the very holy gods, and discussed this:  
whether the æsir should pay a fine,  
or all the gods should have tribute.
24. That was yet the battle of armies, the first one in the world.  
Odin let fly and shot into the army,  
The shield wall of the fortress of the æsir was broken,  
The battle-wise vanir knew how to tread the field.

I am uncertain about portions of the above translation, especially the second half of stanza 23. In stanza 21 and stanza 24, the term I have translated as "army" and "armies" is *fólk*, and although the word indeed means "army" in the older poetry, by the Middle Ages it also commonly had the meaning "people." Thus,

it is quite possible that the scribes of the *Poetic Edda* and a thirteenth-century audience could have understood the stanza as referring literally to a battle of peoples.

Although these stanzas are anything but clear, they seem to tell of a battle precipitated by the entry of Gullveig or Heid among the *æsir*. They were unable to kill her with spears or fire, and she was a practitioner of *seid*, the ancient form of divination and of magic in general. Since Snorri says that Freyja brought *seid* to the *æsir*, many scholars have assumed that Gullveig/Heid is actually Freyja, one of the *vanir*, and that her corruption of the *æsir* precipitated the war. Gullveig appears to mean "Gold-drink" or possibly "Gold-intoxication"; Heid means perhaps "Shiny." Stanza 23 seems to have to do with an inability to reach a truce during a war, and understood thus it leads nicely into the battle of stanza 24. The move, however, from "*æsir*" to the inclusive "all the gods" could indicate a move toward a community involving *æsir* and *vanir*.

When Snorri tells about the war in *Skáldskaparmál*, it is as part of the much longer story of the origin of the mead of poetry, which *Ægir* has asked Bragi about. The beginning of this story, Bragi responds, is that the gods had been in conflict with that people (*fólk*) who were called the *vanir*, and they negotiated a truce settlement in which each side spat into a kettle. From the mingled spittle came *Kvasir*, and from him in turn came the mead of poetry, but that is another story.

Snorri devotes more attention to the war and its aftermath in *Ynglinga saga*. Here the story is set into the historical or pseudohistorical context of the *æsir* as Asians and the *vanir* as a people dwelling by the river Tanakvísl, or, as Snorri says it might be called in violation of every modern linguistic norm but in a perfectly reasonable medieval linguistic jump, Vanakvísl. Snorri, in chapter 4, describes what looks like a real war. The story is as follows:

Odin went to war against the *vanir*, but they defended themselves and their land well, and neither side could gain the upper hand. They agreed on a settlement and exchanged hostages [here understood as men exchanged as pledges of good faith]. The *vanir* sent their most distinguished men, Njörd and Frey, and the *æsir* in exchange sent Hœnir, whom they declared to be a great leader, and Mímir, who was very wise. In response, the *vanir* sent *Kvasir*, who was also very wise. Hœnir proved to be unable of leadership without consulting Mímir, so the *vanir*, suspecting that they had been cheated, beheaded Mímir and sent the head to Odin. Odin preserved the head and it told him many hidden things. The *æsir* made Njörd and Frey into leaders of cult. Freyja, Njörd's daughter, first taught *seid* to the *æsir*. Brother-sister incest, which had been common among the *vanir*, was banned among the *æsir*.

Even if Freyja is not identical to Gullveig/Heid, the various versions seem to share the notion of a disruptive entry of persons into a people (Gullveig/Heid among the *æsir*, Hœnir and Mímir among the *vanir*) and the acquisition of tools for the acquisition of wisdom, *seid* in two accounts and the head of Mímir in one. Both of Snorri's accounts place more emphasis on the settlement than on the war, and from *Skáldskaparmál* we learn that the tangible symbol of the truth, the mixed spittle, ultimately became one of the greatest tools for wisdom, namely the mead of poetry. *Ynglinga saga* also indicates that the most distinguished of the *vanir*, Njörd and Frey, were fully incorporated into the *æsir*.

Since the *vanir* are fertility deities, the war has often been understood as the reflection of the overrunning of local fertility cults somewhere in the Germanic area by a more warlike cult, perhaps that of invading Indo-Europeans. But Georges Dumézil argued forcefully that the story of the war need be no more historical than any other myth: It is set before the emigration from the Middle East, and it is far more focused on the truce than on the details of any battles. The myth of the war between the *æsir* and *vanir* (perhaps better termed the "reconciliation of the *æsir* and *vanir*"?) explains symbolically how a religious system contains various kinds of deities with varying functions.

*See also* Hœnir; Mead of Poetry; Mímir; Seid

**References and further reading:** Dumézil published his ideas on the war in many places, but the easiest of access is found in chapter 1 of his *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, Publications of the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, 3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973). A social reading drawing on Indo-European parallels is Jarich G. Oosten, *The War of the Gods: The Social Code in Indo-European Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1985). Those wishing to see how the arguments were constructed for the notion of warring cults may consult Karl Weinhold, "Über den Mythos vom Wanenkrieg," *Sitzungsberichte der königlichen preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, phil.-hist. Kl. 1890: 611–625, or H. W. Stubbs, "Troy, Ásgard, and Armageddon," *Folklore* 70 (1959): 440–459. Torbjörg Östvold, "The War of the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*: A Myth of the Fall in Nordic Religion," *Temenos* 5 (1969): 169–202, has not found favor.

## ÁLFABLÓT

"Elf-sacrifice," pagan ritual known from literary sources.

The Icelandic skald Sighvatr Thórdarson composed verses about his journey to Västergötland, Sweden, circa 1017, gathered under the title *Austrfararvísur*. Often the pagan Swedes refused hospitality, and in one verse this refusal is explicitly linked to the *álfablót* that is going on inside. The verse says that it was an old woman who denied entry, and that she was afraid of the wrath of Odin.

This would appear to associate a cult of the elves explicitly with the gods. *Kormáks saga*, chapter 22, has the prophetess Thórdís give advice to Thorvard, who was wounded in a duel with Kormák and seeks to be healed. He must get a bull slain by Kormák, pour its blood on a hill inhabited by elves, and prepare a feast for them out of the slaughtered meat. Although the word *álfablót* is not used, this too looks like a sacrifice to the elves. Certainly there is a vast difference between a ceremony held indoors, as in the Swedish *álfablót* mentioned by Sighvatr, and sacrificial acts undertaken in nature, as the thirteenth-century *Kormáks saga* suggests for tenth-century Iceland, and this difference appears to be greater than one would expect for regional variation. Since Sighvatr actually uses the term *álfablót*, and is something of an eyewitness, we should probably give his account precedence.

### ÁLFHEIM (ELF-LAND)

Property of Frey, presumably a residence.

The information on Álfheim is found in the second half of stanza 5 of *Grímnismál*, which begins the list of residences of the gods:

Álfheim the gods in ancient times  
Gave to Frey as a tooth-gift.

A tooth-gift was given when a child cut its first tooth, that is, when it was around a year old. The notion of Frey as an infant among the *æsir* contradicts the myth of the *Æsir-Vanir War*, in which Frey joined the *æsir* as a hostage (human pledge) and at the time was a distinguished man.

Perhaps for this reason, in *Gylfaginning* Snorri has a different account of Álfheim: It is, as the name suggests, the abode of the elves—or more precisely, the light-elves; the dark-elves (only Snorri has this distinction) live below the earth. No connection between Frey and the elves is known from other sources.

Álfheimar (plural) was also according to medieval historiography the name of the geographic district between the mouths of the Göta and Glom (Norse Raum) rivers in the coastal border districts between Sweden and Norway. The *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* reports that the people who lived there were fairer than others, which could indicate an association with the elves, but the name of the district probably is derived from a word meaning a gravel layer under a field.

**ALFÖDR (ALL-FATHER)**

Odin name, found in skaldic and eddic poetry and frequent in the *Gylfaginning* in Snorri's *Edda*.

In *Gylfaginning* the very first question put by Gylfi/Gangleri is "Who is the foremost or eldest of all the gods?" Hár answers, "That one is called Alfödr in our language, but in Old Ásgard he had twelve names." The names listed are Odin names, but Odin is not explicitly identified as Alfödr until later in *Gylfaginning*. Later Snorri writes: "And he may be called Alfödr because he is the father of all the gods and of men and of all that which was done by him and his power. The earth was his daughter and his wife. From her he got his first son, Ása-Thor." Although Snorri seems to use Alfödr and Odin interchangeably (and some manuscripts have Alfödr where others have Odin), it is not until he has formally introduced Odin as the first in his catalog of æsir that the identification of Odin and Alfödr is made explicitly.

Odin is the foremost and eldest of the æsir; he rules all things, and as powerful as the other gods are, they serve him as children do a father. . . . Odin is called Alfödr.

The form *födr* for "father" appears to be archaic. It is also found in the Odin names Herfödr and Valfödr.

*See also* Odin

**References and further reading:** Walter Baetke discussed Snorri's use of the name Alfödr in his *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig*, phil.-hist. Kl., 97:3 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1950). According to Baetke, the obvious Christian analogue to the concept of an all-father has to do with Snorri's attempt to describe the natural religion of his pagan forbears, which Snorri assumes would have tended toward monotheism. Thus Odin, only one of many gods in the mythology itself, was in Baetke's view promoted to a leading position in Snorri's description of it.

**ALMÁTTKI ÁSS**

"All-powerful deity" of unknown identity.

The expression is found in oaths and is given its fullest expression in *Landnámabók* (in chapter 268 in the *Hauksbók* version). The passage describes the paganism that obtained in Iceland in the early days of the settlement. Every pagan temple should have a ring, and before entering into legal proceedings, each man should swear an oath on that ring:

I attest that I make an oath on the ring, a legal oath: May Frey and Njörd and the almáttki áss help me in this case as I prosecute or defend or bring witnesses or verdicts or judgments, as I know how to do most rightly or truly or



procedurally correctly, and dispatch all legal pleadings which fall to me, while I am at the assembly.

I cite the full passage to counteract the impression given by some modern writers that the oath served for general purposes; the author of this recension of *Landnámabók* states quite clearly that it is a legal oath.

No certainty as to the identity of the *almáttki áss* has been reached. An interpretation based purely on the mythology would lead to Odin, the all-father and most powerful of the *æsir*. A consideration of the role of Thor around the time of the conversion to Christianity and his lengthened name *Ása-Thor* would lead easily to him. A focus on the ring might lead to Ull, for in *Atlakvida*, stanza 30, Gudún reminds Atli that he has sworn oaths on the ring of Ull. And in his *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, Rudolf Simek even plays with the idea of Týr, which might be possible if one attempted a purely historical reading.

Because Frey and Njörd are *vanir*, the word *áss* in the formula appears to point specifically away from the *vanir*. But we must be cautious, as the entire passage in question is the product of a medieval Christian author who was demonstrably far more interested in his ancestors' Christian background than in their pagan background. Perhaps he even meant the "almighty áss" to be a noble pagan anticipation of the new religion that was to come.

**References and further reading:** Hermann Pálsson, "Áss hinn almáttki," *Skírnir* 130 (1956): 187–192 (in Icelandic; argues for Ull). Jakob Jóh. Smári, "Áss hinn almáttki," *Skírnir* 110 (1936): 161–163 (in Icelandic; argues for a nameless creator). Henry L. Tapp, "Hinn almáttki áss—Thor or Odin?" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956): 85–89. Gabriel Turville-Petre, "The Cult of Odin in Iceland," in his *Nine Norse Studies*, Viking Society Text Series, 5 (London: Viking Society; University College London, 1972), 1–19.

### **ALVISSMÁL**

Eddic poem, "The Words of All-wise."

Found only in *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, the poem is situated between *Völundarkvida* and *Helgakvida Hundingsbana I*, the first of the heroic poems in the manuscript. *Alvissmál* may be the last of the poems in the mythological section because it has a dwarf as a main character; *Völundarkvida* has an elf, and the two together may therefore represent a transitional section from poems of gods to poems of men.

*Alvissmál* consists of 35 stanzas of dialogue in the meter usually used for dialogue, *ljóðaháttir*. In the first stanzas one of the speakers announces that he has come for a bride, and when challenged about his identity says, "I am named Alvíss [All-wise], / I live down under the earth, / I have my dwelling under a stone." In

stanza 6 the other speaker, the father of the bride, identifies himself as Vingthór, the son of Síðgrani; that is, Thor, the son of Odin. Thor will only give up the girl, whose troth was, he says, given while he was away (stanza 4), if the dwarf will tell him everything he wishes to know. What follows is a series of 13 questions. Each of them begins with the formula “Tell me that, Alvíss, / —all the fates of men / I expect that you know, dwarf.” The questions themselves concern vocabulary: What is something called, by which Thor seems to desire a list of synonyms. In his responses Alvíss provides these synonyms according to the races or groups of beings in the mythology. The groups are not always quite the same, but humans, gods, and giants are constants, and vanir (as opposed to the gods in general), elves, dwarfs, and the dead occur frequently. Generally the everyday word is assigned to humans and the other terms are from the poetic vocabulary. Frequently the words assigned to the gods have an elegant feel, while those assigned to the giants feel heavy or clumsy, although admittedly such feelings are to a certain extent subjective.

The categories Thor requests are as follows: earth, heaven, moon, sun, clouds, wind, calm, sea, fire, wood, night, seed, and ale. These categories and the order in which they appear can hardly be arbitrary. The first five are cosmic, and they are presented in the order in which they appear in the creation story. Sea and fire will destroy the cosmos at Ragnarök, wood could represent Yggdrasil, the world tree, and beer, which comes from grain that grows out of seeds, is associated with Odin and wisdom. At the equivalent point in an Odinic wisdom contest there would be an epiphany, as in *Grímnismál* or *Vafthrúdnismál*, leading to the death of the one contending in wisdom with the god, and here something similar happens: Night, the eleventh category, has ended. Thor has the last word, and in his final half-stanza he uses the “magic” meter *galdralag*. “In one breast / I never saw / more ancient wisdom; / with great deceits / I declare you trapped: / you are “dayed out,” dwarf, / now the sun shines in the hall.” We surmise that the ray of sunlight shatters the dwarf or turns him to stone, as in many dwarf legends; a giantess is turned to stone under precisely the same circumstances in a heroic eddic poem, *Helgakvida Hjörvardssonar*.

Neither Thor nor dwarfs are ordinarily known for skill at verbal dueling, and despite tantalizing hints associating some dwarfs with wisdom, most have none. This and other evidence has been used to propose a late origin for the poem. But Thor is responsible for protecting his females, and thus the result of the action of the poem is appropriate, even if its players strike us as misplaced.

**References and further reading:** A good study of the language of the poem is Lennart Moberg, “The Language of *Alvíssmál*,” *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 18 (1973): 299–323. Calvert Watkins, “Language of Gods and Language of Men: Remarks on Some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions,” in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans: Studies in Indo-European Comparative*

*Mythology*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 1–17, provides a broader context. The situation of the frame, Thor protecting his daughter from a misalliance, is illuminated in Margaret Clunies Ross, “Þórr’s Honour,” in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1994), 48–76.

### **ANDHRÍMNIR (SOOTY-IN-FRONT)**

Cook at Valhöll.

The key passage is stanza 18 of *Grímnismál*.

Andhrímnir in Eldhrímnir  
Has Sæhrímnir boiled.

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri understands the passage as a cook (Andhrímnir) cooking pork (the pig Sæhrímnir) in a huge pot (Eldhrímnir), and indeed the rest of this stanza seems to call Sæhrímnir the best of pork and refers to the mysterious nourishment of the einherjar. All three of the names are joined by the element *hrímnir*, which is derived from the word for soot on a cookpot. The element *And-* could refer to (or could have been understood by Snorri as referring to) the front of the cook, who would be facing the cookpot as he worked his culinary magic.

*See also* Eldhrímnir; Sæhrímnir

### **ANDLANG**

The second of three heavens in the cosmology of Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*.

No other text refers to this place or to a second heaven, so it may be Snorri’s invention. The name appears to mean “stretched out” but might conceivably derive from a longer form meaning “spiritual heaven.”

*See also* Vidbláinn

### **ANDVARI (CAREFUL)**

Dwarf from whom Loki and the gods extract gold to pay compensation for their killing of Otr, the son Hreidmar.

The story is told in Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*, in the prose header and opening stanzas of *Reginismál* in the *Poetic Edda*, and in *Völsunga saga*. The gods involved are Odin, Hœnir, and Loki. Loki kills Otr (“Otter,” who had in fact taken the form of an otter), and Hreidmar demands compensation. Using Rán’s

net, Loki captures Andvari, who has been swimming about in the form of a pike, and extracts from him all his gold, right down to a ring the dwarf wishes to keep. When Loki insists on having it anyway, the dwarf curses it, saying that it will lead to death and discord. So it does.

Andvari is also mentioned in the catalog of dwarfs in *Völuspá* and in the thulur. The thulur also include the word as a noun for “fish.”

*See also* Dwarfs

### ANGRBODA (SHE-WHO-OFFERS-SORROW)

Giantess mate of Loki and mother of monsters.

The name is found only once in poetry, in *Hyndluljóð*, stanza 40, a part of the “Short *Völuspá*.”

Loki sired the wolf on Angrboda,  
and got Sleipnir on Svadilfari;  
the witch alone seemed most evil  
the one that came from the brother of Byleipt.

Snorri makes Angrboda, “a giantess in Jötunheimar,” the mother of three monsters: the Fenrir wolf; Jörmungand, that is, the Midgard serpent; and Hel. This raises the possibility that the witch in lines 3–4 of the stanza quoted above from *Hyndluljóð* may be Hel.

*See also* Fenrir; Hel; Loki; Midgard Serpent

### ÁRVAK AND ALSVIN (EARLY-AWAKE AND VERY-SWIFT)

Horses that pull the sun.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 37, is the main source:

Árvak and Alsvin, they should up from here,  
The bold ones, pull the sun,  
And under their traces the blithe powers,  
The æsir, hid “iron cold.”

The names of the horses are bound by alliteration, and they also occur as a couple on the other occasion when they appear in verse. This is in *Sigrdrífumál*, in a mysterious part of the poem introduced by a stanza saying that Mím’s head spoke. The very next stanza, number 15, is where the horses appear:

On a shield shall be carved, the one which stands before the shining god,  
On the ears of Árvak and on the hoof of Alsvin,



*This engraved stone found in Havor, Gotland, might be an unusual depiction of the horses that pull the sun, Árvak and Alsvin. (The Art Archive/Historiska Museet Stockholm/Dagli Orti)*

On that wheel, which turns itself under the riding of Rungnir,  
On Sleipnir's teeth and on the springs of a sled.

The list goes on, and it becomes no more edifying.

Snorri paraphrases the stanza from *Grímnismál* in his *Gylfaginning*, but, rather uncharacteristically, he has nothing to add about the horses. He does, however, expand the "iron cold" (*ísarn kól*) into wind-driven bellows called "Ísarnkól."

*See also* Sól

### ÁSA-THOR (THOR-OF-THE-ÆSIR)

Name for Thor.

This name is found in *Hárbarðsljóð*, stanza 52, and frequently in Snorri's *Edda*. Although it is sometimes used in cases where Thor's might is held up to question (e.g., in the Útgarda-Loki story), it may be going a bit far to regard the name as ironic.

**References and further reading:** Albert Morey Sturtevant, "Regarding the Name Ása-Pórr," *Scandinavian Studies* 15 (1953): 15–16.

### ÁS-BRÚ (ÆSIR-BRIDGE)

Alternate name for Bilröst, according to Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning*. He cites *Grímnismál*, stanza 29, which may, however, use the word as a common noun rather than as a name.

*See also* Bilröst

### ÁSGARD (ENCLOSURE-OF-THE-ÆSIR)

The abode of the gods.

The name is found in eddic poetry, in Snorri's *Edda*, and, perhaps most interestingly, in a fragment of a poem about Thor composed by the late-tenth-century skald Thorbjörn díarskáld, who was one of two skalds to leave us poems addressed to Thor, the only such verse we know of. What Thorbjörn said was "Thor has defended Ásgard and Ygg's [Odin's] people [the gods] with strength." The noun *-gard*, "yard," is used of the domains of the major groups in the mythology: Ásgard for the gods, Midgard (Central-enclosure) for humans, and Útgardar (Outer-enclosures) for the jötnar (the last, however, is found only in connection with Útgarda-Loki). Within Ásgard was Valhöll.

What makes Ásgard an enclosure is the wall around it, which an elaborate story in *Gylfaginning* seems to address. The gods had established Midgard and

had built Valhöll when a builder came to them and offered to build a fortress so secure that giants could not get through it. He offered to do the job in a year and a half against a payment of Freyja, the sun, and the moon. The gods thought they had cut a great deal when they got him to agree to do the job within half a year with only the help of his horse Svadilfari. They were mistaken, and when three days were left it appeared all but certain that the wall would be completed. The gods blamed Loki and threatened him. Loki changed himself into a mare and distracted Svadilfari. The wall was never completed, and when Thor returned he killed the giant builder. Loki subsequently gave birth to Sleipnir.

**References and further reading:** The medieval and folklore analogues to the story of the construction of the wall were long ago pointed out by C. W. von Sydow, "Studier i Finnsägner och besläktade byggmästarsägner," *Fataburen*, 1907: 65–78, 199–218; and 1908: 19–27; Lotte Motz's discussion, "Snorri's Story of the Cheated Mason and Its Folklore Parallels," *Maal og minne*, 1977: 115–122, adds little. Joseph Harris, "The Masterbuilder Story in Snorri's *Edda* and Two Sagas," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 91 (1976): 66–101, argues that Snorri created the story in an attempt to clarify *Völuspá*, stanzas 25–26. His source would have been an oral legend, retained in two of the Sagas of Icelanders, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heidarvíga saga*, about two berserks who build a road; this legend was in turn based on the international migratory legend von Sydow had discussed. The argument is quite plausible, but it was disputed by Ursula Dronke, "Völuspá and Satiric Tradition," *Annali: Sezione germanica: Studi nederlandesi, studi nordici* 77 (1979): 57–86, who postulated a lost *Lay of Svadilfari* as the source of *Völuspá*, stanzas 25–26.

### **ASK (ASH-TREE) AND EMBLA**

First humans.

The story of the creation of humans is found in *Völuspá*, stanzas 17–18, and in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*. According to *Völuspá*, Ask (the first human man) and Embla (the first human woman) were found on shore, capable of little and fateless. Odin, Hœnir, and Lódur endowed them with the various qualities they needed to live. Odin gave breath or spirit, Hœnir gave mental faculties or voice, and Lódur gave blood, ruddiness, or vital warmth and good coloring. Snorri adds some details and changes others. The creator gods, according to Snorri, are the sons of Bor (elsewhere Bur)—Odin, Vili, and Vé—who find two pieces of wood on the seashore and fashion them into humans. One of Bor's sons gives spirit and life; the second, mind and movement; the third, appearance, speech, hearing, and vision. The sons of Bor also gave these vivified pieces of wood clothing and their names, Ask and Embla, and from them descend the races of mankind.

In *Völuspá*, the stanzas about Ask and Embla follow the catalog of dwarfs, and it is quite possible that stanza 10, which refers to the dwarfs' making of

human forms out of the earth, may be involved. In this scenario, the dwarfs would have formed humans, but the gods would have endowed them with life.

Although Ask clearly means “Ash tree,” the meaning of Embla is uncertain. “Elm tree” is one possibility, but it encounters serious linguistic obstacles. The other possibility usually offered is “vine,” and in connection with this option comes the further suggestion of a relationship between human sexual congress and the turning of a hardwood such as ash into a soft wood to make fire.

*See also* Hœnir

**References and further reading:** The possible role of the dwarfs in the creation of Ask and Embla is argued forcefully in Gro Steinsland, “Antrogonimyten i Voluspá: En tekst- og tradisjonskritisk analyse,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983): 80–107. For Embla as “vine” and the hardwood/softwood hypothesis, see Hans Sperber, “Embla,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 36 (1910): 219–222.

## ATLA

One of nine giant mothers, perhaps of Heimdall, listed in *Hyndluljóð*, stanza 37 (part of the “Short *Völuspá*”).

*See also* Heimdall, *Hyndluljóð*

**References and further reading:** Lotte Motz, “Giantesses and Their Names,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981): 495–511.

## AUDHUMLA

The proto-cow, involved in the origin of the races of gods and giants.

Although the name is found among the thulur for “cow,” Audhumla’s mythological role is found only in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*. Snorri says that Audhumla emerged from the drips of rime just after Ymir was formed, and that four streams of milk ran from her udders and nourished Ymir. She in turn licked salt blocks, and from these there emerged in three days Búri, the first of the æsir.

Although cows are not uncommon in creation stories from around the world, what is most striking about Audhumla is that she unites the two groups of warring groups in the mythology, by nourishing Ymir, ancestor of all the giants, and bringing into the light Búri, progenitor of the æsir. The presumed etymology of her name, “hornless cow rich in milk,” is of no help in interpreting her mythological role.

*See also* Ymir

**References and further reading:** On the etymology, see Adolf Noreen, “Urkon *Audhumla* och några hennes språkliga släktningar,” *Namn och bygd* 6 (1918): 169–172.



**AURBODA (GRAVEL-OFFERER)**

Giantess, mother of Gerd, Frey's wife.

The relevant source is *Hyndluljóð*, stanza 30, lines 5–8:

Frey possessed Gerd, she was the daughter of Gymir [corrected from Geymir]  
Of the race of giants, and of Aurboda.

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri repeated this information.

Stanza 38 of *Fjölsvinnsmál*, which is stanza 54 in the poem editors create out of *Grógald* and *Fjölsvinnsmál* and which they call *Svipdagismál*, also mentions an Aurboda. She occurs in a list of nine maidens who sit at the knees of Menglöd. Although Menglöd is a giantess, these are not giantess names—one, indeed, is Eir, an *ásynja* according to Snorri, and the others are adjectives like bright, blithe, and fair. I doubt that we are dealing with the same Aurboda in both cases.

*See also* Frey, Gerd

**AURGELMIR (MUD-YELLER)**

Primeval giant.

In *Vafthrúdnismál* Odin asks Vafthrúdnir who was the oldest of the *æsir* or kin of Ymir. Vafthrúdnir says Bergelmir was born many years before the earth was formed; his father was Thrúdgelmir and his grandfather Aurgelmir. Odin now asks (stanza 30), whence Aurgelmir first came among the sons of the *jötnar*. The giant responds:

From the Élivágar spurted poison drops,  
Thus it grew, until a giant emerged.

Odin now asks how that giant got children, since he had no pleasure of giantesses. Vafthrúdnir responds in stanza 33:

Under an arm of the frost giant, they say, grew  
A maiden and lad together;  
A leg got on a leg of the wise [or fruitful] giant  
A six-headed son.

Snorri quotes these verses but says that Aurgelmir was the name the frost giants used for Ymir. Since that would be unique, we must again assume that Snorri was systematizing, although it is also true that the hermaphroditic

birthing process fits better etymologically with Ymir (whose name has to do with doubling) than with Aurgelmir.

*See also* Bergelmir; Thrúðgelmir; Ymir

## AURVANDIL

Giant (?) whose toe was made into a star by Thor; husband of Gróa.

According to Snorri's account of Thor's duel with Hrungnir in *Skáldskaparmál*, Thor was visited by the seeress Gróa, who sang charms over him and thereby loosened the whetstone that was lodged in Thor's head after the duel.

And when Thor learned that and thought it likely that the whetstone would be removed, then he wanted to repay Gróa for her cure and make her happy. He told her that he had been wading from the north across the Élivágar and had carried Aurvandil on his back in a basket out of Jötunheimar, and a sign of it was that one of Aurvandil's toes had stuck out of the basket and frozen, and Thor broke it off and cast it into the sky and made of it that star which is called Aurvandil's Toe. Thor said that it would not be long before Aurvandil would come home, and Gróa became so happy that she forgot the charms and the whetstone grew no looser.

Although the etymology of the name is unknown, it is cognate with Old English *earendel*, "dawn, ray of light," so there may be a Germanic myth here, despite the absence of Aurvandil from the Norse poetic corpus. Thor also made stars out of Thjazi's eyes, and in my view we should read these acts as his contribution to cosmogony, an area in which he is otherwise absent.

**References and further reading:** Rudolf Much, "Aurvandils tá," *Altschlesien* 5 (1934): 387–388, speculates on the star that Aurvandil's toe may represent.

## BALDR

God, member of the æsir group, killed by his blind half brother Höd, buried in a solemn funeral, and left in the world of the dead when an attempt to retrieve him fails.

The death of Baldr is one of the most important moments in the mythology. Parts of the story are alluded to in various skaldic poems; much of it is told in the *Codex Regius* version of *Völuspá*, and Snorri gives a full version in *Gylfaginning*, using a probably oral version of *Völuspá* and other sources. According to Snorri, Baldr is the second son of Odin, after Thor, and "about him there is good to report; he is the best, and all praise him; he is so fair of face and bright that he seems to shine, and one plant is so white that it is compared to Baldr's brows;

that is the whitest of all plants, and from it you can note his beauty, both of hair and of face; he is the wisest of the æsir and the most eloquent, and the most merciful, but that nature accompanies him, that none of his judgments stands. He lives where it is called Breidablik; that is in heaven; in that place nothing can be nothing impure." A few pages later Snorri reports that Forseti is the son of Baldr and Nanna Nepsdóttir. Later in the *Gylfaginning* he tells about Baldr's death and its aftermath, and these stories take up about 10 percent of the entire *Gylfaginning*.

Baldr's death actually comprises several constituent parts, and Snorri is the first to combine them all in one fluid narrative, even if *Völuspá*, a version of which he clearly had before him, tells most of the story. These parts may conveniently be divided as follows: Baldr's death, his funeral, the attempted revival, and vengeance for him.

The story of Baldr's death and the attempted revival are intertwined, by Snorri at least. It begins, according to him, with Baldr suffering disquieting dreams, presumably that he may be injured or killed. Frigg elicits an oath not to harm him from all things, and thereafter the æsir take sport in attacking him with weapons and stones, and it seems an accomplishment to them that he is unhurt. Loki is displeased that Baldr is unhurt. He takes the form of a woman, goes to Frigg, and asks whether anything can harm Baldr. Frigg responds that she took oaths from everything except mistletoe, which seemed too young. Loki gets some mistletoe, fashions a spear from it, and heads to the assembly. There he sees Baldr's blind half brother, Höd, not participating in the sport. He gives the mistletoe spear to Höd, who casts it at Baldr. It pierces Baldr, and he falls dead to the earth. "The greatest misfortune among gods and men was done," says Snorri.

The gods are stricken, and no vengeance can be taken on the spot because it is a place of sanctuary. Frigg asks for a volunteer to go to Hel to try to retrieve Baldr. Hermód, another son (or a servant) of Odin volunteers. Borrowing Sleipnir, he travels nine nights until he comes to the Gjallar bridge (Gjallarbrú, the bridge between earth and the underworld), where he is challenged by the maiden Módgud. She tells him that the way to Hel is down and north. He rides on, comes to Hel, and sees that Baldr is in the high seat (the seat of honor) in her hall. Hel agrees to release Baldr if all things, living and dead, will weep for him. Bearing tokens from the underworld, Hermód returns to the land of the living. Emissaries are sent to request that everything weep for Baldr, and just when the attempt appears to have succeeded, they come upon an old lady who calls herself Thökk (Thanks). She speaks a verse: "Thökk will weep / dry tears / about Baldr's funeral; / I had no use for Karl's son, / alive or dead; / let Hel keep what she has." People think, Snorri explains, that this old lady who kept Baldr with Hel was Loki.

While Hermód was undertaking his journey, according to Snorri, Baldr's funeral took place. Snorri was probably following the skald Ólf Uggason's *Húsdrápa* here, a poem that describes the rich carved decorations in the newly built hall of Ólaf pái (Peacock) from around 1185 or so in western Iceland. Here is what *Húsdrápa* says about the funeral:

The battle-wise Frey rides on a boar, bristled with gold, first to the pyre of the son of Odin, and leads armies. The exceedingly widely famous Hropta-Týr [Odin] rides to the pyre of his son. There I perceive valkyries and ravens accompany the wise victory-tree [man; here Odin] to the blood of the holy corpse. Thus [the hall] is adorned from within with things remembered. The excellent Heimdall rides a horse to that pyre that the gods had built for the fallen son of the very wise tester of the raven [Odin]. The very powerful Hild of the mountains [giantess] caused the sea-Sleipnir [ship] to trudge forward; but the wielders of the helmet flames of Hropt [Odin] felled her mount.

Snorri has more detail. He adds several gods to the list of those who attended, and he makes sense out of the stanza with the giantess in it by stating that the funeral ship could not be launched and that the gods therefore sent to Jötunheimar for that ogress who was called Hyrrokkin. "She arrived riding a wolf with poisonous snakes for reins, and when she dismounted, Odin called to four berserks to look after the horse, and they could not hold it unless they killed it. Then Hyrrokkin went to the prow of the ship and shot it forward at the first try so that sparks leapt out of the runners and all the lands shook." Thor was enraged and would have killed her had the gods not pleaded for amnesty for her. Thor kicked a little dwarf named Lit into the fire, and Nanna died of grief and was put on the pyre with Baldr. The ring Draupnir and Baldr's horse were also burned with him.

The vengeance sequence comprises two parts. The first, regarding which Snorri is silent in *Gylfaginning*, is told in *Völuspá*: "Baldr's brother was / quickly born; / that son of Odin / killed when he was one night old." In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri reports that kennings for Váli include "enemy of Höd and his killer." Vengeance is also taken on Loki, and here Snorri has a very detailed narrative (the prose following *Lokasenna* in the *Poetic Edda* tells much the same story but says that the gods were taking vengeance for Loki's reviling of them). Loki runs off to a mountain and sequesters himself in a house with four doors out of which he peers to watch for the *æsir*'s attack. Frequently changing himself into a salmon, he anticipates the strategy of the *æsir* and makes a net but burns it and leaps into the river as they approach. Seeing the pattern in the ashes, Kvasir understands the potential it represents, and the *æsir* pursue Loki with a net. Twice he evades them, but on the third try he attempts a leap over the net and

Thor grabs him by the tail, which is why salmon to this day are thin by the tail. The *æsir* take Loki to a cave, where they bind him to the rock. They change one of his sons into a wolf and have it tear the other to pieces. They suspend a poisonous snake over him, dripping venom. His wife Sigyn catches the venom in a pot, but when she goes to empty it the venom falls onto his face, and his writhings cause earthquakes.

Saxo Grammaticus has a rather different story of Baldr's death and the aftermath. Høtherus, the foster son of King Gevarus, and Balderus, the son of Othinus and a demigod, have both fallen in love with Nanna. Høtherus acquires a special sword and a magic ring. Nanna refuses Balderus on the grounds that demigods and humans are incompatible. Høtherus and an ally confront Balderus and the gods in a sea battle and gain victory when Høtherus slices the handle off Thor's hammer, the gods' major weapon, with his magic sword.

Høtherus marries Nanna. In a subsequent battle Balderus defeats him. Balderus is plagued by dreams of his desired Nanna. Høtherus is now chosen king of the Danes, but in his absence the Danes vote again, and this time they choose Balderus. In a third battle Høtherus is put to flight. In their final battle he wounds Balderus. Balderus dreams of Proserpina (as Saxo calls her, using the Roman name for the Greek Persephone, who like Hel presided over the underworld), dies, and is buried in a mound.

The story now turns to vengeance. A sorcerer advises Othinus that he must seduce Rinda, the daughter of the king of the Rutenians. After three failed attempts, first disguised as a warrior, then as a smith, and then as a knight, Othinus returns a fourth time, disguised as a woman, and becomes a serving maid to the princess. When Rinda falls sick, Othinus arranges for her to be tied down so that she can be given some medicine. He rapes her, and she bears Bous, who kills Høtherus.

These stories are indeed quite different, but there are important similarities that go beyond Höd killing Baldr and having vengeance taken on him. Dreams are important in both versions, as is a magic weapon. The goddess of the dead plays a role in each. The rape of Rinda is paralleled in medieval Icelandic tradition in a skaldic stanza that states that Odin used the magic *seid* on Rind, the mother of Váli. The differences in the versions may reflect variants in medieval Icelandic oral tradition, since Saxo learned from Icelanders, but he may also be passing along some genuine Danish traditions.

The story has led to many attempts at interpretation, some of them rather fanciful. The mistletoe remains unexplained, despite Sir James Frazer's attempt to build up a grand theory around it. In fact, the story may have far less to do with the fertility exemplified by various gods who die (in the fall) and are reborn (in the spring) than it does with initiation into a hypothetical cult of Odin. Thus

Höd's name seems to have meant "battle," and his blindness intensifies Odin's sacrifice of a single eye. *Gautreks saga* contains a sham sacrifice to Odin that turns real. When Starkad throws at King Víkar a reed that has been provided to him by another person, the reed turns into a spear and kills the king.

However, analysis of the Baldr story as Odinic ritual runs up against the fact that in *Völuspá* Baldr's death leads directly to Ragnarök (and the victory of Høtherus over all the gods in Saxo may be analogous). For Snorri, too, Baldr's death was a disaster that led to Ragnarök. I understand the story as the mythic reflection of a basic social problem, namely, the fact that a society that used blood feud to resolve disputes—as medieval and presumably saga Iceland did—could not deal with a killing within a family. Simply by requiring a counterattack against the family of the killer, Höd's killing of Baldr puts Odin in an impossible situation. He turns outside the kin group to sire the avenger Váli/Bous, but that is no solution, since it simply displaces the problem of brother killing brother. The Old English epic poem *Beowulf* has a story that looks cognate, in which one brother, Hædcyn (Höd) mistakenly kills another, Herebeald (Baldr?). Hredel, the father, dies of grief.

**References and further reading:** A comparison of the versions of the story in the Icelandic sources and Saxo, arguing essential similarity, is Margaret Clunies Ross, "Mythic Narrative in Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson," in the volume *Saxo Grammaticus: Tra storiografia e letteratura: Bevagna, 27–29 settembre 1990* (Rome: Editrice "Il Calamo," 1992), 47–59. Sir James Frazer's reading of the Baldr myth—still a classic of "armchair anthropology"—may be studied in his "Balder the Beautiful," in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (New York: St. Martin's Press: 1990 [1890]), part 7; see also John Stanley Martin, "Baldr's Death and *The Golden Bough*," in *Iceland and the Medieval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell*, ed. Gabriel Turville-Petre and John Stanley Martin (Victoria, Australia: The Organizing Committee for Publishing a Volume in Honour of Professor Maxwell, 1974), 26–32. My reading of the Baldr myth is in my *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, FF Communications, 277 (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1997); see also my "Interpreting Baldr, the Dying God," in *Australian Academy of the Humanities Proceedings*, 1993: 155–173 (also in *Old Norse Studies in the New World*, ed. Judy Quinn, Geraldine Barnes, and Margaret Clunies Ross [Sydney: University of Sydney, 1994], 14–25). On blood feud, see William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and on its general application to the mythology see my "Blood Feud and Scandinavian Mythology," *Alvíssmál* 4 (1994): 51–68. In her *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Icelandic Society*, vol. 1: *The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), Margaret Clunies Ross stresses the dynastic implications of the story: Baldr is Odin's legitimate heir, and his death brings about a crisis of succession.

**BALDRS DRAUMAR (BALDR'S DREAMS)**

Eddic poem.

Found not in *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* but only in the other main manuscript, AM 748, the poem comprises 14 stanzas in *fornyrðislag*. It begins with the *æsir* in a state of crisis over Baldr's bad dreams. Odin rides to Hel. He is confronted by a hellhound but rides east of Hel's hall, where he knows the grave of a seeress lies. Aroused, she asks his identity, and he says that he is Vegtam (Accustomed-to-the-road). From stanza 6 onward the poem consists of a series of questions put by Odin and answered by the seeress. The seeress concludes each response except the last by saying she was forced to speak and now will fall silent, but Odin always forces her to continue. First, Odin asks for whom the hall of Hel has been prepared; the seeress answers that it is for Baldr. Second, Odin asks who will kill Baldr, and the answer is Höd. The third question is who will avenge Baldr, and the answer is apparently Váli (the name is omitted in the manuscript but a name beginning with *V* is required to complete the alliteration). The fourth and last question is not clear but has to do with the identity of a group of maidens. Somehow, in a way we no longer understand, the question reveals to the seeress that she is conversing with Odin. To this Odin replies, "You are not a seeress, / nor a wise woman, / but rather of three / giants the mother" (stanza 13). "Go home," she says. The next step is Ragnarök.

The version of the myth of Baldr's death here omits the role of Loki, which is so important in Snorri's version, although some observers have seen a reference to Loki in the mother of three giants of stanza 13, since Loki's children are three of the most famous giants, namely, the Midgard serpent, the wolf Fenrir, and Hel herself. This version would seem to focus on the essentials: Baldr will die, Höd will kill him, Váli will avenge Baldr's death. That is a departure from Snorri's version far greater, in fact, than the omission of Loki's role, for Snorri has nothing to say of vengeance on Höd. Most sources seem to agree that the vengeance is an integral part of the myth.

In form, *Baldrs draumar* shares much with the other eddic contests of wisdom, especially *Vafthrúdnismál*, which also has an unclear reference to a group of females near the end of the poem and a question that reveals Odin's identity, although in *Vafthrúdnismál* and *Baldrs draumar* these are not the same question.

Although there are striking verbal parallels with *Thrymskvida*, few observers are as confident of a late date for *Baldrs draumar* as they are for that poem.

**References and further reading:** Discussions of the poem in English include John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*, FF Communications, 262 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1997), 130–134, and Mats Malm, "Baldrs draumar: Literally and Literarily," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature, and Society: Proceedings of the Eleventh Inter-*

*national Saga Conference, 2–7 July 2000*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross and Geraldine Barnes (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), 277–289.

### **BÁLEYG (FLAME-EYE)**

Odin name.

Odin himself includes this in the list of names he gives just before the epiphany in *Grímnismál* (stanza 47). The Icelandic skald Hallfred Óttarson vandræðaskáld used the kenning “Báleyg’s wife” to refer to the earth in stanza 6 of his *Hákonardrápa*, composed for Hákon the Hladir jarl toward the end of the tenth century, and in the early twelfth century Gísli Illugason called warriors “trees of Báleyg” in a memorial to the Norwegian king Magnús Bareleg. The name is also found in the thulur. The flame must be metaphorical, a reference to the fierce gaze of Odin’s one eye.

In *Grímnismál* Báleyg follows and alliterates with Bileyg (Wavering-eye), and this name pair has been associated with Bolwísus and Bilwísus in Book 6 of the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, two old men who counsel King Sigarus in the Hagbard and Signe story. Bilwísus works to reconcile enemies, while Bolwísus sows dissension, even among friends. Many observers have accepted that what Saxo says here reflects two sides of Odin, a distinction that is contrasted in the names Bileyg and Báleyg.

*See also* Bileyg; Ód

### **BARRI**

The trysting place where Frey will meet Gerd, his giant bride-to-be.

We have the story in *Skírnismál* and in an abbreviated form in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*. In brief, after Frey’s emissary Skírnir has cajoled Gerd, the giantess with whom Frey has fallen in love from afar, she agrees to meet him in nine nights’ time at Barri (Barrey, according to Snorri).

Magnus Olsen’s hoary explanation, that Barri has to do with *barr*, “barley,” ties the story to a hypothetical fertility myth, in which Skírnir is understood as the sun’s ray and the ensuing marriage as a holy wedding of a god and the earth. Those who are unpersuaded point out that *barr* can just as well mean “pine needle,” which would fit with the fact that *Skírnismál* explicitly calls Barri a grove, that Snorri’s Barrey (Barley-island or Grain-island) makes no sense in the context of a fertility myth, and that in both texts the marriage is in fact postponed. However, no other explanations of the names themselves have been proposed.



**References and further reading:** Magnus Olsen's famous article is "Fra gammel-norsk myte og kultus," *Maal og minne*, 1909: 17–36. The most solid philological criticism of Olsen's reading of Barri is that of Jöran Sahlgren, "Lunden Barre i *Skírnismál*," *Namn och bygd* 50 (1952): 193–203 (summary in English, p. 233).

### BAUGI (RING-SHAPED)

Giant, brother of Suttung, the giant from whom Odin obtained the mead of poetry.

Baugi is known only from Snorri's *Edda* and from the thulur and is not attested anywhere in poetry. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri has Odin setting forth to obtain the mead. He comes upon nine slaves who are cutting hay and sharpens their scythes with a whetstone he has brought along. The scythes are so much sharper that each of the slaves wants the whetstone for himself, and as they are contending over who might purchase it, Odin throws the hone in the air. As they scramble to get it, they cut each other's throats. At this point we learn that these slaves worked for Baugi, and Odin, calling himself Bölverk (Evil-deed), offers to do the work of nine men, for a wage of one drink of the mead. Baugi says that Suttung alone controls the mead but that he will help. After the summer work season is over, Bölverk/Odin asks for his payment, and when Suttung flatly refuses a single drop of the mead, Bölverk/Odin enlists Baugi's help. They drill into the mountain, and when Baugi says the tunnel is finished, Bölverk/Odin blows into the hole. But chips fly back, indicating the other end is still blocked. Bölverk/Odin realizes that Baugi wishes to deceive him. They drill again. Odin then turns himself into a snake and slithers into the hole. Baugi strikes at him but misses, and thereupon he vanishes from the mythology as quickly and puzzlingly as he has entered it.

The major problem with Baugi is his absence outside Snorri, especially from *Hávamál*, which Snorri seems to be paraphrasing in most of the story of the acquisition of the mead of poetry. A. G. van Hamel argued that Snorri found Baugi in another source (indeed, that Odin obtained the mead from Baugi) and that the version we have in *Skáldskaparmál* is thus an artful blending of the two sources. Others have argued that Snorri invented Baugi, and Aage Kabell thought he knew why: because he misunderstood stanza 110 of *Hávamál*:

A ring oath [*baugeiðr*] I think Odin made,  
What good are his pledges?  
He left Suttung deceived from the feast  
And made Gunnlöð weep.

The problem with this hypothesis is that ring oaths were tolerably well known in medieval Iceland, and the stanza is really quite clear. If Margaret Clu-

nies Ross is right in reviving an argument that a ring might stand for the anus in certain contexts and thus be involved in innuendo concerning *ergi* (sexual perversion), Snorri may have been indulging in wordplay; or he may even have imagined a kind of symbolic rape of Suttung through Baugi alongside his rape of Gunnlöð, Suttung's daughter.

*See also* Mead of Poetry; Odin

**References and further reading:** Van Hamel's thoughts are expressed in "The Mastering of the Mead," in the volume *Studia Germanica tillägnade Ernst Albin Kock den 6 december 1934* (Lund: C. Blom), 76–85. On Baugi and the ring, see Aage Kabell, "Baugi und der Ringeid," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 90 (1975): 30–40. Margaret Clunies Ross wrote on the possible metaphorical value of the ring in "Hild's Ring: A Problem in the Raganarsdrápa, Strophes 8–12," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 6 (1973): 75–92.

## BELI

Giant killed by Frey.

This appears to be one of those lost myths that can be glimpsed only in passing. In kennings Frey is called "killer of Beli," but the only reference to how it might have happened is in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*. Just after sketching the story of the arrangement of Frey's marriage to Gerd, Snorri adds that because Frey gave Skírnir his sword, he was weaponless when he fought with Beli, and therefore he killed the giant with the horn of a hart. Because in *Skírnismál*, stanza 36, Gerd complains of the slaying of her brother by Frey, some observers have wished to believe that Beli was Gerd's brother.

*See also* Frey

## BERGBÚA THÁTTUR (THE TALE OF THE MOUNTAIN-DWELLER)

Tale incorporating a poem spoken by a thirteenth-century giant, including many mythological references.

The text is retained in manuscripts from the end of the fourteenth century but is usually assigned to the thirteenth century. It tells of how one Thórd and his servant got lost on their way to church in winter and took shelter for the night in a cave. There they heard noises, saw a pair of huge burning eyes, and finally heard the owner of those eyes recite a well-crafted poem of 12 stanzas, repeating it three times over the course of the evening. In the poem the speaker refers to himself as a *bjarg-álfr*, "mountain-elf," which is a kenning for giant and refers to his journeys around mountains and north to the Élivágar in the third netherworld. He has, he says, a house all to himself on the lava field, but few visit him there. In short, he appears to be a supernatural nature being such as have been

commonly found in European folklore until very recently—a lone denizen of the areas far from where humans live. But this particular giant has ties to Norse mythology. “Strong Thor makes trouble for people,” he says in stanza 10, and “the earth is rent, because I say that Thor thus again came thither,” he adds in stanza 11. The word “people” in stanza 10 could, in the language of poetry, refer to the speaker’s people, that is, the giants, or it could refer to everyone in the world. The rest of the poem indulges in prophecies: The mountains will tumble, the earth will move, men will be scoured in hot water and burned by fire, and so forth, and this may be a mix of the destruction of the race of giants and of humans, as in Ragnarök (Surt’s fire is mentioned in stanza 10). But many of the predictions of disruption on earth could also fit the volcanic activity that is so common in Iceland.

At the end of the poem the speaker tells his listeners to remember it or bear a punishment. Thórd has it word-for-word, but the servant does not. He dies a year after the night in the cave. The cave itself cannot be located, and Thórd moves closer to the church.

*See also* Ragnarök; Thor

### **BERGELMIR (BEAR-YELLER, MOUNTAIN-YELLER, OR BARE-YELLER)**

Giant, one of those from whom giants traced their genealogy.

*Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 29, states the lineage of Bergelmir. Odin has asked Vafthrúdnir who was the oldest of the æsir or of the kin of Ymir. Vafthrúdnir responds,

A great many years before the earth was formed,  
Bergelmir was born;  
Thrúdgelmir was the father of this one,  
And Aurgelmir the grandfather.

After asking about the monstrous birth of the offspring of Aurgelmir, Odin asks what Vafthrúdnir’s oldest memory is. Vafthrúdnir responds in stanza 35:

A great many years before the earth was formed,  
Bergelmir was born;  
What I first remember is when the wise giant  
Was placed on a *líðr*.

This verse has occasioned all sorts of speculation. Snorri wrote in *Gylfaginning* that it had to do with a flood story. After the sons of Bor killed Ymir, his blood flooded the earth and “with it all of the frost giants were killed, except one who got away with his family. The giants called that one Bergelmir. He got up

on his *lúðr* along with his wife and saved himself there, and from them come the families of the frost giants."

Snorri clearly understood the *lúðr* as something that would float, and the word might in fact have meant "coffin" or "chest" or some wooden part of a mill; the expected meaning, of a cumbersome musical instrument something like an alphorn, makes no sense either in Snorri or his poetic source. If there is any consensus here, it is that what Vafthrúdnir remembered was the funeral of Bergelmir, and what Snorri made of it was an analogue to the Judeo-Christian flood story.

*See also* Aurgelmir; Thrúðgelmir; *Vafthrúdnismál*; Ymir

**References and further reading:** The best interpretation of the issues surrounding Bergelmir and his *lúðr* remains that of Anne Holtsmark, "Det norrøne ord *lúðr*," *Maal og minne*, 1946: 49–65.

## BERSERKS

Furious warriors, in mythology associated with Odin.

The passage in question is chapter 6 of Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, which also provides a description of *berserksgangr*, "going berserk." After stating that Odin could make his enemies blind, deaf, or overcome with fear in battle, their weapons useless, Snorri added, "but his men went without armor and were crazed as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, were strong as bears or bulls. They killed men, but neither fire nor iron affected them. That is called going berserk."

Other than this passage, berserks seem to have belonged more to the world of men than of gods, which agrees with the project of euhemerism Snorri had adopted with *Ynglinga saga*. The skaldic poem *Haraldskvæði*, assembled from various fragments and generally attributed to a poet called Thorbjörn hornklofi, assigns berserks to the forces of King Harald Fairhair at the battle of Hafrsfjörd (late ninth century): "The berserks howled, / battle was on their minds, / the wolf-skins growled / and shook their spears" (stanza 8b). In stanza 20 the poet asks about berserks, "who drink blood," and answers himself: "They are called wolf-skins, / who in battle / carry bloody shields; / they redden spears / when they come to battle" (stanza 21a).

According to chapter 9 of *Vatnsdæla saga*, one of the Sagas of Icelanders, probably composed in the years just before 1280, Harald Fairhair had berserks on board his ship who were called *úlfhednar*; they wore wolfskins and defended the prow.

The connection between wolf-skins and berserks supports one of the suggested etymologies for medieval Icelandic *berserkr*, namely, "bear-shirt," and this etymology is ordinarily mentioned in light of such warrior-animal amalgamations as those on the Torslunda helmet plates from Sweden, which suggest warriors wearing animal skins, masks, or both. Adherents of this etymology see



*Buckle of gilded bronze from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Finglesham, Kent, with bosses and rivets encircled with gold wire. It shows a naked male figure in a horned helmet and belt, holding a spear in each hand. (Courtesy of Ms. Sonia Hawkes)*

a connection with a reconstructed Odin cult, which in turn, they argue, may reflect Indo-European ecstatic warrior cults usually known by the German scholarly term *Männerbünde* (sing., *Männerbund*). The other proposed etymology of *berserkr* is “bare-shirt.” Snorri’s statement about the lack of armor appears to support this etymology, although there is always the possibility that Snorri wrote these words because of his own understanding of the etymology.

Beside Harald Fairhair and the Odin of *Ynglinga saga*, other kings in older Scandinavian literary tradition are accorded berserks as elite troops, and the medieval Icelandic law code, *Grágás*, has a provision against going berserk. Elsewhere in medieval Icelandic literature, however, berserks are mostly stereotypical figures who threaten but are easily overcome by heroes, sometimes after challenging for the hand of a woman. Although there may be a parallel here with the lusting of the giants for Freyja and the other female *æsir*, the only direct connection between berserks and the mythology is the passage from Snorri. If, however, there indeed was a cult of warriors in animal disguise, it would almost certainly have centered around Odin.

**References and further reading:** D. J. Beard, “The Berserkr in Icelandic Literature,” in *Approaches to Oral Literature*,

ed. Tobin Thelwall (Ulster: New University of Ulster, 1978), 99–114. Benjamin Blaney, “The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme,” *Scandinavian Studies* 54 (1982): 279–294.

**BESTLA**

Odin's mother.

The relationship of Bestla and Odin is set forth in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*. The first man was Búri, whose son was Bor.

He married that woman who was called Bestla, the daughter of the giant Bölthorn. They had three sons; the first was called Odin, the second Vili, the third Vé.

*Hávamál*, stanza 140, gives a variant version of the name, Bölthor, and makes him Bestla's grandfather:

Nine magic songs I got from the famous son  
Of Bölthor, Bestla's father,  
And I got a drink of the precious mead,  
Poured from [by? to?] Óðrerir.

Although there is nothing in this stanza indicating a family relationship with Odin, and although the mead was, according to other sources, stolen, it is not inconceivable that Odin could have obtained magic songs from his maternal uncle (the verb in the first line, literally "got," also means "learned"). And skalds knew of Bestla as Odin's mother and formed kennings based on the relationship. One manuscript of Snorri's *Edda* says that one may make Odin kennings by calling him "father of Bestla or of his other children," but since this contradicts the other sources and is absent from the other manuscripts, we need not pay it too much attention.

It is of course significant that Odin is descended from the giants on his mother's side, since the slaying of Ymir by him and his brothers must therefore be understood as a killing within a family, the slaying or denial of a maternal relation. Another theory, however, advanced by Waltraud Hunke, sees Bestla as the bark of the world tree, on which Odin was perhaps born (or reborn in an initiation?) according to *Hávamál*, stanza 141 ("then I started to grow fruitful"). Hunke would then understand Bestla etymologically as the bark of the maternal tree.

*See also* Odin

**References and further reading:** Waltraud Hunke, "Odins Geburt," in *Edda, Skalden, Saga: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Felix Genzmer*, ed. Hermann Schneider (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1952), 68–71.

**BEYLA**

Mythological character.

Beyla is found only in the prose header to *Lokasenna* and stanzas 55–56 of the poem. The prose header says that she and Byggvir were servants of Frey. In stanza 55 she warns Loki that Thor is approaching and will silence the one slandering all the gods. Loki replies in stanza 56: “Shut up, Beyla! / You are Byggvir’s wife / and much mixed with evil; / a greater monster / never came among the sons of the gods; / you are entirely filthy, milkmaid.” Beyla is one of those figures for whom scholars have had to turn to etymology for interpretation, but the problem is that the etymology is anything but clear. Her name may be related to a word for “cow,” “bean,” or “bee.” Why Loki should accuse her of being entirely filthy remains unclear.

**References and further reading:** Georges Dumézil, “Two Minor Scandinavian Gods: Byggvir and Beyla” (1952), in his *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, Publications of the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, 3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 89–117.

**BIL AND HJÚKI**

Children who accompany the moon, according to Snorri Sturluson.

Snorri includes them in his discussion of the moon in *Gylfaginning*; they were taken up from earth as they left the well called Byrgir, carrying a bucket and a pole. Their father was Vidfinn (Wood-Finn). Now they accompany the moon, as can be seen from the earth.

These names are found only in this passage, with one exception: Later in *Gylfaginning* Snorri says that, along with Sól (Sun), Bil, “whose nature was explained above,” is numbered among the æsir. The absence of this whole moon story from other sources has led many observers to the conclusion that they lack mythic significance, or even that Snorri invented them, but Anne Holtsmark advanced a plausible argument to the effect that Snorri had a now lost verse source, probably a learned riddle in which Bil and Hjúki represented the waning and waxing moon. Holtsmark thinks it possible that Bil was one of the *dísir* (female spirits).

**See also** Máni; Sól; Vidfinn

**References and further reading:** Anne Holtsmark, “Bil og Hjuke,” *Maal og minne*, 1945: 139–154. Alfred Wolf, “Die germanische Sippe *bil*: Entsprechung zu *Mana*: Mit einem Anhang über den Bilwis,” *Språkvetenskapliga sällskapets i Uppsala förhandlingar*, 1928–1930: 17–156, thought that the root *bil* meant “supernatural power” and referred to a concept like *mana*, a supernatural power in gods and objects.

**BILEYG (WAVERING-EYE)**

Odin name.

Odin himself includes this in the list of names he gives just before the epiphany in *Grímnismál* (stanza 47). It is not, however, known from other sources, although it is listed among the thulur.

This name is found in the same line, and alliterates with Báleyg (Flame-eye), and some observers think two sides of Odin are represented in the pair.

*See also* Báleyg; Odin

**BILLING'S GIRL**

Subject of a section of the poem *Hávamál*, one of the so-called Odin's examples.

Told in the first person by Odin, the section begins by announcing that Odin awaited his beloved (presumably Billing's girl) in the reeds. She was dear to him but he had never possessed her. He found Billing's girl asleep on the bed and desired her. She made an assignation with him. He returned for this assignation, but the way was blocked by flame and an efficient warrior band. In the morning he returned and found a bitch bound on the bed in place of the woman. Stanza 102 appears to be a reflection on the episode and has numerous verbal parallels with stanza 96. Stanzas 96 and 102 therefore bracket the incident.

Sigurður Nordal understood the episode as a display of the magic of Billing's girl, who thwarted Odin's advances by deflecting his magic powers onto a dog on her bed. In this light, the binding of the dog would be a magic binding imposed by Odin in anticipation of a rape. Most other observers content themselves with contrasting the failed seduction with the successful seduction of Gunnlöd in the following episode in the poem.

Billing is listed as a dwarf name in the *Hauksbók* version of *Völuspá* and is found in a kenning for poetry: "cup of the son of Billing." Since both the dwarfs and giants possessed the mead of poetry before Odin retrieved it, this kenning works whether Billing is a dwarf or a giant. The problem with understanding Billing as a dwarf is not one of sexual congress between gods and dwarfs, for Freyja slept with three dwarfs to obtain the Brísinga men, and the dwarf Alvíss coveted Thor's daughter and even claimed to have affianced himself to her (*Alvíssmál*). However, if Billing is a dwarf, his "girl" (presumably daughter) would be one of the very few female dwarfs in the mythology. Certainly Billing's girl is a member of an out-group, and Odin seduces and rapes many of these.

The most telling analogue is stanza 18 of *Hárbardsljóð*, in which Odin boasts of having his way with giant girls on the island Algroen (All-green) in precisely the same language he uses in *Hávamál*, stanza 99, for his desire for Billing's daughter: To possess a woman is to have "all her mind and pleasure." If



the common language indicates a common story, the reeds in stanza 96 would be near the island Algrœn, but that is surmise.

Odin ought not to come up short in any of his encounters, and for that reason it is useful to speculate on how Odin's failure to seduce Billing's girl may in fact be a success. I have suggested that failing to sleep with the bitch keeps him from committing an act of bestiality, which properly belongs in the realm of the giants. A parallel in Icelandic folklore in which the motif of a bitch bound in place of a girl is used to prevent father-daughter incest may also be relevant.

**References and further reading:** Two articles are devoted to this incident: Sigurður Nordal, "Billings mær," in the volume *Bidrag till nordisk filologi tillägnade Emil Olson den 9 Juni 1936* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup; Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1936), 288–295, and John Lindow, "Billings mær," in *Gudar på jorden: Festskrift till Lars Lönnroth*, ed. Stina Hansson and Mats Malm (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2000), 57–66.

## BILRÖST

The bridge between the world of humans and the world of the gods or between earth and heaven.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 44, is a list of the foremost or best of things: Yggdrasil of trees, Odin of æsir, and so forth. There Bilröst is called best of bridges. In *Fáfnismál*, stanza 15, Fáfnir responds to a question asking what the island is called where Surt and the æsir will fight, presumably at Ragnarök.

Óskópnir it is called, and there shall all  
The gods make play with spears;  
Bilröst will break, when they go away,  
And horses will swim in the current.

Bilröst is compounded of *bil*, "stopping place, time, instant, weak spot," and *röst*, ordinarily "league" or "current" but here apparently with the meaning "road." Snorri uses instead the form "Bifröst," whose first component has to do with wavering or shaking. Snorri mentions "Bifröst" several times. Asked about the path to heaven from earth, Hár tells Gylfi/Gangleri that it is Bilröst, that the gods made it, and that it may be called the rainbow. It is of three colors, very strong, and made with great skill and knowledge, but it will break when the sons of Muspell ride over it. Nothing can survive the harrying of the sons of Muspell, and much later in the text, describing Ragnarök, Snorri says that Bilröst will break, "as was previously stated." Jafnhár also tells Gylfi/Gangleri that the gods ride this bridge, which may also be called the Ás-Brú (Æsir-bridge), up to the Urdarbrunn (Well-of-Urd), where they go to make judgments. And a bit after

that, Gylfi/Gangleri asks whether fire burns over Bilröst. Hár responds that the red “in the bow” is indeed fire, and he implies that it is there to keep the giants away. From *Gylfaginning* we also learn that at the upper end of the bridge there stands Himinbjörg, where Heimdall lives.

Fire on the bridge is also found in *Grímnismál*, stanza 29, which reports that Thor crosses the rivers Körmt and Örmr and two named Kerlaug each day when he goes to judge at the ash of Yggdrasil,

Because the Ás-Brú burns all with fire,  
The holy waters boil.

The notion of the bridge between earth and heaven, or earth and the world of the gods, has a parallel in the Gjallarbrú, a bridge between earth and the underworld, or earth and the world of the dead.

*See also* Gjallarbrú

**References and further reading:** Åke Ohlmarks, “Stellt die mythische Bilröst den Regenbogen oder die Milchstrasse dar? Eine textkritische-religionshistorische Untersuchung zur mythographischen Arbeitsmethode Snorri Sturlusons,” *Meddelanden från Lunds astronomiska observatorium*, ser. 2, 110 (1940): 1–40, asks whether Bilröst represents the rainbow or the Milky Way and concludes that Bilröst originally was the Milky Way but that Snorri reinterpreted the bridge as the rainbow when confronted with the variations in the terminology. Bilröst as the Milky Way is hardly a new concept; see, for example, Franz Rolf Schröder, *Germanentum und Hellenismus: Untersuchungen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte*, Germanische Bibliothek, Abteilung 2, vol. 17 (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1924). William MacArthur thought he saw Bilröst among “Norse Myths Illustrated on Ancient Manx Crosses,” *Notes and Queries*, ser. 11, 5 (1912): 506, but no one else has done so.

## BILSKÍRNIR

Thor’s hall.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 24, has Odin reveal the following vision as he catalogs the dwellings of the gods:

Five hundred rooms and forty  
There are, I think, under the arches of Bilskírnir  
Of those halls which I know to be roofed,  
My son’s is the biggest.

In *Gylfaginning*, when he introduces Thor, Snorri has Hár say that Thor has a kingdom at Thrúdvangar and a hall called Bilskírnir with 540 rooms, which is

the greatest of buildings. He then cites this verse. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri says that “owner of Bilskírnir” is a valid Thor kenning, and in fact “prince of Bilskírnir” is attested in the skaldic corpus.

The meaning of the name is unclear, but it seems to be either “suddenly illuminated [by lightning]” or “everlasting.”

*See also* Thrúðvangar

## **BLÁIN**

In *Völuspá*, stanza 9, apparently an alternate name for Ymir:

Then all the powers went to their judgment seats  
The very holy gods, and discussed,  
Who should form the lord of dwarfs,  
Out of the blood of Brimir and the limbs of Bláin.

Containing as it does the adjective “blue,” the name might refer to the blue sky. It is, however, also found in the *thulur* as a dwarf name.

*See also* Brimir

## **BÖLTHOR(N)**

Father or grandfather of Bestla, Odin’s giant mother.

The form “Bölthor” is found in *Hávamál*, stanza 140, where he is referred to as the father of Bestla and of a famous but unnamed son, from whom Odin got or learned nine magic songs. The form “Bölthorn” is found in Snorri, who says that Odin married that woman who was called Bestla, the daughter of Bölthorn. The difference in name forms does not appear to be significant, but Bölthorn obviously means “Evil-thorn,” whereas the form “Bölthor” would not have had an obvious meaning to a Viking or medieval Scandinavian.

A special relationship with the maternal uncle is mentioned by Tacitus and is found in Norse texts and a proverb from medieval Iceland: “Men turn out most like their maternal uncles.” Certainly Odin, of all the gods, turned out most like a giant.

*See also* Bestla, Odin

## **BOUND MONSTER**

Enemy of the gods bound or restrained in some way during the mythological present but destined to break free at Ragnarök.

The monster who best fits the pattern is the wolf Fenrir, whose sole function in the mythology is to be bound by the gods and then to break free at Ragnarök and wreak havoc: to swallow the sun according to *Vafthrúdnismál* and to kill Odin according to *Völuspá*. Fenrir was bound with a magic fetter and bit off Týr's hand, which was placed in his mouth as a pledge that the binding was in sport. Fenrir may be identical with Garm, who according to a refrain in *Völuspá* howls before the cave Gniphellir: "The bond will burst, / and the wolf run free."

Fenrir was the son of Loki and the giantess Angrboda, one of a brood of three. In light of the binding of Fenrir, we may be justified in regarding the exile of his siblings—the Midgard serpent to the outer waters of the sea and Hel to the world of the dead—as a kind of binding. No fetters are used, but the serpent does lie coiled about the earth, biting its own tail, and this linking of mouth to tail might be taken as a kind of binding. Like Fenrir, the Midgard serpent will be "unbound" from the ocean at Ragnarök and will kill Thor. There is no parallel "unbinding" for Hel, however.

Loki is the most important and studied of the bound monsters in Scandinavian mythology. His binding occurs, according to Snorri, as vengeance for the killing of Baldr. According to the prose colophon to *Lokasenna*, however, Loki was bound as vengeance for his reviling of the gods at the feast of Ægir. Loki's binding is more uncomfortable than that of his monster children, however, for a snake hangs over his head dripping venom. His wife Sigyn collects the venom in a bowl, but when she goes to empty the bowl Loki writhes in anguish and shakes the earth, "and that is now called earthquakes," as the passage following *Lokasenna* puts it. Loki of course gets free at Ragnarök and according to *Völuspá* will steer a ship full of the forces of evil against the gods. Snorri also grants him a mutually fatal single combat with Heimdall.

Since the early twentieth century, and especially through the influential study of Ragnarök by Axel Olrik, Loki as bound monster has been associated with similar figures from traditions of people living in the Caucasus. However, at least Fenrir and Garm are also clearly bound monsters, and the notion of bound forces of evil who will break free at Ragnarök could be extended to nearly all the forces who will assail the gods at that time. If we are to take seriously the notion of a loan from the Caucasus, it would affect nearly the entire mythology. And of course there was the analog within Christian legend of the bound Antichrist awaiting the Last Judgment.

*See also* Fenrir; Garm; Hel; Loki; Midgard Serpent; Ragnarök

**References and further reading:** The early studies of the bound monster and the Caucasian analogs included M. Anholm, "Den bundne jætte i Kavkasus," *Danske studier* 1 (1904): 141–151; Bernhard Kahle, "Der gefesselte Riese," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 8 (1905): 314–316; and Friedrich von der

Leyen, "Der gefesselte Unhold: Eine mythologische Studie," in *Untersuchungen und Quellen zur germanischen und romanischen Philologie: Johan von Kelle dargebracht von seinen Kollegen und Schülern*, Prager deutsche Studien, 8 (Prague: C. Bellman, 1908), vol. 1: 7–35. Axel Olrik's study appeared originally in Danish in 1914 but found its canonical form in the 1922 translation by Wilhelm Ranisch, *Ragnarök: Die Sagen vom Weltuntergang* (Berlin and Leipzig: W. de Gruyter); a book-length chapter (pp. 133–290) treats the bound giant in the Caucasus and is followed by a consideration of the bound wolf (pp. 291–326). A more recent study was that of Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "The Snake Tower," *Scandinavian Studies* 16 (1940): 22–33, which associated Loki with the hero Gunnar in the snake pit and saw England as the conduit.

## BOUS

Avenger of Baldr in the version of the story in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*.

Bous was the result of Othinus's rape of the Rutenian princess Rinda. He grows up skilled with weapons, and when he is ten, Odin summons him and argues that vengeance is more noble than killing random adversaries. When Bous and Høtherus (in Saxo's version, Balderus's competitor for the affections of Nanna) meet in battle, Bous kills Høtherus but himself receives a mortal wound; he dies the next day. Thus Bous differs from Váli, the avenger of Baldr in the vernacular west Scandinavian traditions, not just in his name, for Váli survives not only the encounter with Höd but also, and far more significantly, the cataclysmic demise of gods, giants, and the cosmos that is Ragnarök. Váli is truly an enduring figure, but Bous is a very minor player in Saxo's history.

The name Bous is ordinarily understood to represent a Danish version of the medieval Icelandic name Búi, and since the name is ultimately related to the verb meaning "to dwell, settle," earlier scholars associated it with their theories of fertility myth and ritual associated with Baldr's death. But "Búi" was an ordinary man's name, and indeed was not infrequently used in heroic legend: One of the most famous of the Jómsvíkingar, for example, was Búi the Stout, and a Búi also turns up among the sons of Karl in *Rígsthula*.

*See also* Baldr; Rind; Váli, Son of Odin

## BRACTEATES

Small round golden disks, stamped with images on one side and occasionally also with runic inscriptions.

Bracteates date from the late Migration Period (5th–6th centuries C.E.) and have been found in graves and hoards and as isolated finds. They were probably intended



*Gold bracteate found in Denmark showing a figure in a horned helmet, horse, bird, and swastika. (Universitets Oldsaksamling, Oslo)*

to be worn as pendants hanging around the neck. More than 900 bracteates exist, mostly from Scandinavia but also from England and the Continent.

Bracteates are significant for the study of Norse mythology not for the runic inscriptions but for the human and animal images on them. These were based on Roman iconography, but they soon developed characteristic Germanic forms that some scholars have thought involved especially the god Odin. In a huge body of work, Karl Hauck argued that the bracteates present a “wind-god” who is involved with healing, and specifically that certain bracteates containing this

figure and that of an animal show Odin healing Baldr's horse, as he does in the Second Merseburg Charm. He interprets another characteristic image, that of three figures together (the so-called three-god bracteates) as presenting Odin, Baldr, and Loki, or perhaps Odin, Baldr, and Hel, either of which would correspond to the Baldr myth as we have it in the Scandinavian sources. In addition, the divine twins have been identified in images with two figures. Although Hauck's work is enormously learned and thorough, the mythological interpretations remain speculative and would seem to invite fresh investigations.

*See also* Baldr; Hel; Loki; Merseburg Charms; Odin

**References and further reading:** Karl Hauck provided a relatively short summary of his analyses in the encyclopedia article "Brakteatenikonologie," *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Herbert Jankuhn, Kurt Ranke, and Reinhard Wenskus, 2nd ed. (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1973– ), vol. 3 (1978): 361–401. The details are in his *Goldbrakteaten aus Sievern: Spätantike Amulett-Bilder der "Dania Saxonica" und die Sachsen-"Origo" bei Widukind von Corvey*, Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften, 1 (Munich: W. Fink, 1970), and in a long series of articles from 1971 onward, published in a variety of sources, called "Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten." The bracteates themselves may be found in Hauck, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit*, 3 vols. (Munich: W. Fink, 1985–1989). A recent work reassessing Hauck's thinking is Kathryn Starkey, "Imagining an Early Odin: Gold Bracteates as Visual Evidence?" *Scandinavian Studies* 71 (1999): 373–392.

## BRAGI

God of poetry according to Snorri Sturluson; perhaps identical with Bragi Boddason the Old, traditionally reckoned the first skald.

Bragi is listed fourth in Snorri's catalog of the *æsir* in *Gylfaginning*:

One is called Bragi. He is excellent with respect to wisdom and foremost in linguistic genius and speech. He knows most about poetry, and because of him *bragr* is called poetry, and from his name that one is called a *bragr* of men or a *bragr* of women who possesses verbal talent beyond others, a man or a woman. His wife is Idun.

Snorri has no more to say of Bragi in *Gylfaginning*, but he used Bragi extensively in *Skáldskaparmál*. This usage occurs in the frame. *Ægir* has come to visit the *æsir*, and at the splendid banquet that ensues he is seated next to Bragi, who tells him "many tidings about the *æsir*." These are the mythic narratives of *Skáldskaparmál*, and many are told in the context of a dialogue between *Ægir* and Bragi that precisely parallels the one between Gylfi/Gangleri and Hár, Jafn-hár, and Thríði in *Gylfaginning*.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 44, calls Bragi “best of poets” in a list of other “bests”—Odin of the æsir, Sleipnir of horses, and so forth. In *Lokasenna*, Bragi has an early exchange with Loki. Loki has just joined the æsir after calling on his blood brother relationship with Odin, and Vídar has poured him a drink.

11. [Loki:] Hail æsir, hail *ásynjur*  
and all the very holy gods,  
except that one *áss*, who sits further in,  
Bragi, on the bench.
12. [Bragi:] Steed and sword will I give you of my riches,  
and Bragi will thus fix it for you with a ring,  
lest you repay jealousy to the gods;  
do not provoke the gods to anger at you.
13. [Loki:] Horse and arm rings will you ever  
lack both, Bragi;  
of æsir and elves who are in here  
you are the most wary of battle  
and most shy of a shot.
14. [Bragi:] I know that if I were outside, as I am inside  
come into Ægir’s hall,  
your head I would carry in my hands  
I see that for your lying.
15. [Loki:] You are brave in your seat, you will never do thus,  
Bragi, you adornment of the bench.  
Go your way, if you are angry  
You seem not brave at all.

Bragi’s cowardice is not elsewhere mentioned, and in fact this accusation is common in *Lokasenna*.

Bragi is found at Valhöll in both *Hákonarmál* (stanza 14) and *Eiríksmál* (stanza 3). Each of these late-tenth-century poems shows the arrival of a human king at Valhöll, and it is not inconceivable that the poets imagined Bragi Boddason the poet there as an earlier arrival from the world of humans. If this was indeed the source of Bragi the god, it had to have preceded the stanzas from *Grímnismál* and *Lokasenna*, and this level of relative chronology eludes us.

**References and further reading:** Two of the giants of the nineteenth century debated the question of Bragi the poet and Bragi the god. Eugen Mogk, “Bragi als Gott und Dichter,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 12 (1887): 383–392, derived the god from the poet and thought that Bragi’s promotion to Valhöll had occurred as early as the late ninth century. Opposition came from Sophus Bugge, “Der Gott Bragi in den norrönen Gedichten,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 13



(1888): 187–201, who thought that time frame for the process was too short. Mogk had the last word: “Bragi,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 14 (1889): 81–90.

### BREIDABLIK

Baldr’s dwelling, according to *Grímnismál*, stanza 12, and Snorri in *Gylfaginning*. Interpreting the verse, which says that fewest evils are at Breidablik, Snorri says that nothing impure is there, and he surely had in mind Baldr’s “goodness” when he said this. The name means either “wide-gleam” or “wide-view.”

*See also* Baldr

### BRIMIR

In *Völuspá*, stanza 9, apparently an alternate name for Ymir:

Then all the powers went to their judgment seats  
The very holy gods, and discussed,  
Who should form the lord of dwarfs,  
Out of the blood of Brimir and the limbs of Bláin.

Containing as it does the word *brim*, “surf, seaway,” the name might allude to the making of the sea from Ymir’s blood. It is also found in *Völuspá*, stanza 37, where it appears to refer to a beer hall of the giants, although it is not wholly impossible that it refers to the owner of the beer hall. This hall stands at (or is named, if Brimir owns it) Ókólnir (Uncold).

*See also* Bláin

### BRÍSINGA MEN

Torque or necklace belonging to Freyja.

In eddic poetry, the Brísinga men is found in *Thrymskvida*. It jerks when Freyja is angered at the suggestion that she should go to Giantland (stanza 13), and at Heimdall’s suggestion (stanza 15), it is put onto Thor as he assumed Freyja’s disguise (stanza 19). Otherwise the Brísinga men is found only in Snorri’s *Edda*. In both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri says simply that Freyja owned it, but in *Skáldskaparmál* he also gives two very interesting pieces of information: Loki and Heimdall fought over it, and Loki is known as the “thief of the giants, of the goat, of the Brísinga men, and of the apples of Idun.” A battle between Heimdall and Loki is known from one stanza of the late-tenth-century Icelandic skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* by Úlfr Uggason. It is difficult to interpret, but some

scholars think they may indeed have been fighting over the Brísinga men. In stanza 9 of the *Haustlög* of Thjóðólf of Hvin, one of the very earliest skaldic poems, Loki is called “hoop-thief of Brising’s people,” an apparent reference to his theft of the necklace. The same myth also appears to be recounted in the late *Sörla tháttr*, in which Loki, taking on the form of a fly, steals from Freyja a golden necklace made for her by dwarfs, but the necklace is not explicitly called the Brísinga men.

Lines 1197–1201 of the Old English epic *Beowulf* allude to a legendary narrative in which the hero Hama takes away the necklace of the Brosings (Brosinga mene), fleeing the terror of Ermaneric. This necklace is clearly an analog of the Brísinga men, and many scholars have tried to relate the story attached to it to Loki’s battle with Heimdall or theft of the necklace, an enterprise that is not easy. What the *Beowulf* analog does seem to show is that Brísinga men should be understood as “torque of the Brísings,” not, as some scholars have thought, “gleaming torque” or “sunny torque.” But who the Brísings might be remains an unanswered question. The Brising of *Haustlög* is not found elsewhere, although the thulur refer to a Norwegian island of that name. The simplest explanation might be to regard the Brísings as dwarfs, the ones who, according to *Sörla tháttr*, made Freyja’s precious necklace.

**References and further reading:** Perhaps the most famous treatment of the Brísinga men is an essay by Karl Müllenhoff, “Frija und der Halsbandmythus,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 30 (1886): 217–260, which argues for a kind of solar myth that, as F. Klaeber put it, “compels admiration rather than acceptance” (*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg: Edited with Introduction, Bibliography, Notes, Glossary, and Appendices*, 3rd ed., with first and second supplements [Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950], 178). The archaeological background is explored by Birgit Arrhenius, “Det flammande smycket,” *Fornvännen* 57 (1962): 79–101, and “Zum symbolischen Sinn des Almadin im früheren Mittelalter,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 3 (1969): 47–59. The parallel between Brosinga mene and Brísinga men is treated by Ursula Dronke, “Beowulf and Ragnarök,” *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 17 (1968): 302–325, and Helen Damico, “*Sörlaþáttr* and the Hama Episode in *Beowulf*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983): 222–235.

## BROKK

Dwarf; helped create some of the precious objects of the gods.

Snorri tells the story in *Skáldskaparmál*. Loki had cut the hair off Sif, Thor’s wife, and he avoided a beating only by promising to have the dwarfs make for Sif a headpiece that would grow into golden hair. After having the sons of Ívaldi make the headpiece and also the ship *Skíðbladnir* and Odin’s spear, *Gungnir*, he bets the dwarf Brokk that Brokk’s brother Eitri cannot make three equally good

objects. Brokk is to work the bellows for Eitri, and Loki changes himself into a fly and pesters Brokk. Eitri makes first a boar with gold bristles, then the ring Draupnir, finally Mjöllnir, Thor's hammer. The hammer's handle is short because Brokk's bellows work was nearly interrupted when the fly bit him between the eyes so that blood flowed.

Brokk is known from no other source.

*See also* Dwarfs

### **BUR, BOR (SON)**

Son of Búri, father of Odin, Vili, and Vé.

Bur is found in eddic poetry and in Snorri's *Edda*, where the name is spelled Bor. The word *bur* is a poetic noun meaning "son." With the giantess Bestla, Bur had the three sons Odin, Vili, and Vé.

*See also* Bestla; Búri; Odin

### **BÚRI**

First of the æsir, father of Bur and therefore grandfather of Odin.

Búri is found in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* but not in eddic poetry. He is part of the creation story, for he was licked from salt blocks by the primeval cow Audhumla. Snorri describes him as "fair in appearance, large, and powerful. He begat that son called Bor." Although the text does not make it explicit, we may, I think, assume that he did so through an ordinary human sexual act, in contrast to the monstrous hermaphroditic procreation of Ymir.

*See also* Audhumla; Bur, Bor; Ymir

### **BYGGVIR**

Mythological character.

Byggvir is found only in the prose header to *Lokasenna* and stanzas 55–56 of the poem. The prose header says that he and Beyla were servants of Frey. Byggvir's intervention with Loki in the poem proper follows that of Frey. In stanza 43 Byggvir apparently says (the stanza is difficult) that if he could measure up to Frey, he would give Loki a beating, the evil crow! Loki's response is dismissive: "What is that little thing, / I see strutting about, / a hungry parasite? / At the ears of Frey / you will always be / and will cluck under the millstone" (stanza 45). Byggvir responds by proclaiming his name and stating that all men and gods call him rapid: "I am proud here / that the sons of Hropt [i.e., of Odin] / all drink beer together." Loki responds: "Shut up, Byggvir! / You were never able / to

divide food among people. / And in the straw of the floor / you were never seen / when people fought."

Like his wife Beyla (according to *Lokasenna* stanza 56), Byggvir is mostly understood through the etymology of his name, although the problem is complicated by the competing form in the poem, "Beyggvir." *Bygg* is the word for barley, and much of what the poem says of Byggvir can be imagined to fit barley, which is tiny, ground in a mill, and used in beer. Barley would be associated with Frey insofar as Frey is a fertility god.

If Byggvir is indeed a personification of barley, he is virtually unique in Scandinavian mythology, which otherwise has little to say of such figures.

*See also* Beyla

**References and further reading:** Georges Dumézil, "Two Minor Scandinavian Gods: Byggvir and Beyla" (1952), in his *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, Publications of the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, 3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 89–117, surveys the evidence.

### BYLEIST (BYLEIPT, BYLEIFT)

Loki's brother.

Although he acts in no extant myth, Byleist is found in a number of passages in poetry in the kenning "Byleist's brother" for Loki. Snorri states directly in both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* that Byleist is one of Loki's two brothers; the other is Helblindi.

Unlike Helblindi, whose meaning is transparent (Hel-blind), Byleist's name is obscure. Most attempts at etymology have come up with some sort of meteorological phenomenon, which is hardly helpful.

*See also* Loki

### DAG (DAY)

Personification of the day.

Dag is found in *Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 25, Vafthrúdnir's response to Odin's question in stanza 24, "Whence comes the day / that goes over people / or the night with tides?"

Delling he is called, he is Dag's father,  
And Nótt [Night] was born to Nör.  
New moon and tides the useful powers created  
For people to tell time.

An alternate translation of the second half of the first line would be “he is father of the day.”

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri has an interesting expansion of the idea in this stanza:

Nörfi or Narfi was a giant who lived in Jötunheimar. He had a daughter named Nótt [Night]; she was swarthy and dark, as she had the lineage for. [She had two marriages, to Naglfari, then to Ánar.] Last she married Delling, and he was of the lineage of the æsir. Their son was Dag, according to his paternal heritage.

This is a typical example of Snorri’s view of the mythological difference between jötnar and æsir. But it also shows the importance in the mythology of patriliney, which in medieval Iceland operated within a bilateral kinship system; that is, people could reckon their kin through father *and* mother (and we might expect that they thought they inherited characteristics of both, not just of the father). As in the genealogy of the æsir as a whole, so it is with the heavenly bodies. Dag and Odin each has a giant mother (Nótt, Bestla) and ultimately a giant progenitor on the mother’s side (Ymir, Nörfi), but each is regarded exclusively as a member of the æsir.

Snorri goes on in *Gylfaginning* to say that Alfödr gave Dag and Nótt each a horse and carriage and put them up in the sky, where they go around the earth once a day. “The horse that Dag has is called Skínfaxi, and all the sky and earth glow from its mane.”

*See also* Delling; Nótt; Nari and/or Narfi

### **DÁIN (DEAD)**

According to *Grímnismál*, stanza 33 (and therefore Snorri in *Gylfaginning*), one of the four harts that gnaws on Yggdrasil; elsewhere an appropriate and much-used dwarf name, except in *Hávamál*, stanza 143, where he appears to be an elf.

This last stanza lists various people who carve runes, and since Odin carves for the æsir, the others presumably are of the race for which they carve, and Dáin carves for the elves. Perhaps the name “Dead” was just very useful mythologically.

*See also* Dvalin; Yggdrasil

### **DELLING**

Father of Dag, who is day personified.

Delling is found in *Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 25, Vafthrúdnir’s response to Odin’s question in stanza 24, “Whence comes the day / that goes over people / or the night with tides?”

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This is a typical example of Snorri's view of the mythological difference between jötnar and æsir. As I point out above, in the entry on Dag, it shows the typical mythological emphasis on patriliney. Dag is of the æsir because his father was of the æsir, even though his mother was not.

Delling probably means something like "shining," which would be an appropriate name for the father of the day. But the situation is complicated by *Hávamál*, stanza 160, in which Odin is enumerating charms he has learned:

I know a fifteenth, which Thjóðrörir howled,  
 The dwarf, before Delling's door.

Unless Delling's door is a metaphor for sunrise, there may have been two figures called Delling, the second a dwarf, and Delling is indeed listed in the *thulur* as a dwarf name.

*See also* Dag

**References and further reading:** Rudolf Much, "Der germanische Himmelsgott," in the volume *Abhandlungen zur germanischen Philologie: Festgabe für R. Heinzel* (Halle an der Saale: M. Niemeyer, 1898), 189–278, argued, based on the etymological connection between *Dell-* and *-dall*, that Delling was a representation of Heimdall.

## DÍSABLÓT

Sacrifice to the dísir.

From the point of view of the mythology the most interesting reference to the dísablót is found in a version of *Hervarar saga ok Heidreks konungs* (The Saga of Hervör and King Heidrek), which scholars ordinarily date to around the end of

the thirteenth century, although the dating is difficult. This version of the saga opens with an account of the Learned Prehistory and tells about Starkad Álundrengr. Starkad abducts Álfhild, the daughter of King Álf of Álfheimar, after she has reddened the altar (*hörgr*) with blood at a great *dísablót* one autumn. The prefix *Álf-* means “elf,” and although there is no other evidence connecting the elves with the *dísablót*, on its face the text offers a mythological model for human behavior. The ceremony takes place at the home of a king, is presided over by a woman (one indeed of royal lineage), and involves the spilling of blood, presumably from an animal that was sacrificed. Angered at the abduction of his daughter, King Álf calls on Thor, who subsequently kills Starkad and restores Álfhild to her father. It is at least conceivable that the author of the saga thought that Thor was inclined to intervene because the *dísablót* had been successfully carried out, in other words, that in the eyes of this author at least, a *dísablót* could have been aimed at the *æsir*.

This ceremony is also mentioned in thirteenth-century Icelandic sources of a more historical nature. Two set the ceremony in Viking Age Norway and the other, Snorri’s *Ynglinga saga*, chapter 29, in Uppsala. Snorri says that at the *dísablót*, King Adils was riding around the *dísarsal*, “hall of the *dís*,” when his horse stumbled and threw him. The king’s head struck a rock in such a way that his skull was split and his brain spilled onto the rock, and that was his death. Snorri then quotes Thjóðólf of Hvin’s *Ynglinga tal*, which does not mention the *dísablót* but says that a “creature of magic” or witch was to deprive Adils of his life; the brave descendent of Frey was to fall from his horse and his brain to be mixed with wet sand. Presumably Snorri understood the creature of magic as a witch, and he may also have thought that the *dísablót* involved riding a horse around a building sacred to or temporarily set aside for one of the *dísir*. Here the connection of the *dísir* with death would be echoed. The story is told with less detail in *Historia Norvegiae*.

The other two accounts come from the Sagas of Icelanders. Both set the *dísablót* at a banquet or feast in the midtenth century in Norway. *Egils saga*, which is from the early part of the thirteenth century—perhaps, according to some, from the pen of Snorri Sturluson—says that a feast was prepared at a farm owned by King Eirík Bloodaxe and Queen Gunnhild and that on an evening when the king and queen had just arrived, “there was to be a *dísablót* there.” The actual account of the proceedings has to do pretty much exclusively with drinking huge mugs of beer, but it includes a skaldic stanza by Egil alluding to the *dísablót*. *Víga-Glúms saga*, which was composed a bit later than *Egils saga* and perhaps with that saga in mind, says that Víga-Glúm comes to Voss, in western Norway, and that a feast was prepared at the “winter-nights” (the onset of winter in late October), and the *dísablót* was done.

Thus the *dísablót* appears to have had a connection with autumn and to have been a relatively public event, insofar as it involved the participation of royalty. Beyond that we know little. A *dísathing* (assembly of or for the *dísir*) was held in Uppsala in early February, and there are many place-names attesting to the worship of the *dísir*.

## DÍSIR

Collective female spirits.

In the mythological sources proper the *dísir* are hardly to be found. Their only secure appearance is in the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, stanza 53. Odin is about to reveal his identity to the doomed Geirröd:

Slaughtered carrion  
will Ygg [Odin] have now,  
I know that your life has run its course;  
angry are the *dísir*—  
now you may see Odin,  
approach me, if you can!

The association with impending death seems to be a commonplace of the usage of the term “*dísir*” in eddic poetry. In *Reginismál*, stanza 24, Hnikar tells Sigurd that there is great danger if he should trip going into battle: “Malicious *dísir* / stand on both sides of you / and wish to see you wounded.” In *Hamðismál*, stanza 28, Hamdir, bemoaning the killing of their half-brother at their own hands, tell Sörli that the *dísir* had incited them. Sometimes the *dísir* look like valkyries, as in *Atlamál*, stanza 28, where Glaumvör tells her husband Gunnar a disquieting dream:

I thought dead women  
came hither into the hall,  
not poorly decked out.  
They wished to choose you,  
would have invited you quickly  
to their benches;  
I declare of no value  
these *dísir* to you.

These *dísir* who would choose a doomed warrior and invite him to their benches look rather like valkyries, the choosers of the dead and the maidens who serve them in Valhöll. And indeed, the expression “Herjann’s [Odin’s] *dísir*,”





Figures found all over Scandinavia are believed to represent valkyries or *dísir*. (The Art Archive/Historiska Museet Stockholm/Dagli Orti)

which is found in *Gudrúnarkvida* I, stanza 19, looks like a kenning for the valkyries, Odin's maidens, but since the noun *dís* can also mean just "lady," that stanza may tell us nothing at all about the *dísir*.

Snorri uses the singular form, *dís*, in connection with two figures in *Gylfaginning*. After recounting the story of the failed marriage between Njörd and Skadi, Snorri says that Skadi moved to the mountains and lived at Thrymhrim, "and she goes about much on skis and with a bow and shoots animals; she is called 'snow-shoe god' or 'snow-shoe *dís*.'" Snorri says later in *Gylfaginning* that Freyja "is also called Vanadís," that is, *dís* of the vanir.

The text in which *dísir* play the greatest role is *Thidrandá tháttur ok Thórhalls*, which is found in late-fourteenth-century manuscripts of the *Great Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* but is believed by some observers to have been included in the late-twelfth-century Latin life of Olaf Tryggvason, now lost, by the Icelandic monk Gunnlaug Leifsson. It is set before the conversion of Iceland to Christianity at the farmstead of Síðu-Hall, a leading chieftain who later was to be among those who advanced the cause of the conversion. The prophet Thorhall has foreseen that a prophet is to die at the sacrifice of the winter nights, but Síðu-Hall has a bull named Prophet slaughtered. Thorhall then decrees that none should leave the house at night, but when there are three mighty knocks on the

door, Sídu-Hall's son Thidrandi opens it and goes outside. He is attacked by nine women in black riding from the north, while nine women in white ride from the south. Thorhall later guesses that there will be a change of religion for the better. The women were fylgjur (fetches) of Sídu-Hall's family. The nine women in black were *dísir* who wanted their share before being forever parted from the family, while the nine in white were *dísir* who arrived too late to help.

Many interpretations of these strange women and the events in which they figure have been advanced. Some scholars argue that Sídu-Hall angered the *dísir* by failing to hold the *dísablót* (sacrifice to the *dísir*), but there is no evidence for that in the text. What the text does tell us unequivocally is that some time between the late twelfth and late fourteenth centuries a learned author saw little difference between fylgjur and *dísir* and saw no difficulty depicting them in terms of color symbolism to represent the opposition between the old faith and the new. The destructive and benign nature of the two groups reminds us further of the good and bad fates doled out by valkyries. Once again the distinction among these groups of collective female spirits breaks down.

Another connection with the conversion is the nickname of the poet Thorbjörn *dísarskáld* (Skald of the *dís*), who is one of two poets who left fragments of poetry directly addressed to Thor.

Place-names suggest a cult of the *dísir*, and written sources tell of a sacrifice to the *dísir*, the *dísablót*.

*See also* *Dísablót*

**References and further reading:** General treatments of the *dísir* include Erik Brate, "Disen," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 13 (1911–1912): 143–152; Folke Ström, "Diser, norner, valkyrjor: Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme i Norden," *Kungliga vitterhets, historie och antikvitetsadademiens handlingar*, Filologisk-filosofiska serien 1 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954); and the second part of Dag Strömbäck's "Tidrande och disarna: Ett filologiskt-folkloristiskt utkast," in his *Folklore och filologi: Valda uppsatser utgivna av Kungl. Gustav Adolfs akademien 13.8.1970*, *Skrifter utgivna av Kungliga Gustav Adolfs akademien*, 48 (Uppsala: Kungliga Gustav Adolfs akademien, 1970), 181–191. For a discussion of *Thidrandi tháttur*, see also Merrill Kaplan, "Prefiguration and the Writing of History in *Páttur Þiðrandi ok Þórhallar*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99 (2000): 379–394.

## DRAUPNIR (DRIPPER)

Odin's golden arm ring.

Many skalds use "Draupnir" in kennings for gold, so it must have been well known, although the only Draupnir to be found in eddic poetry by name is a dwarf in the catalog of dwarfs in *Völuspá*. However, in *Skírnismál*, stanza 21,

Skírnir offers Gerd a ring that had been burned with Odin's young son, from which drip every ninth night eight rings of equal weight. This can only be Draupnir, for in *Gylfaginning* Snorri says that Odin put the ring Draupnir on Baldr's funeral pyre and adds the information that he also includes in *Skáldskaparmál* when he tells of the origin of Draupnir. Like Sif's golden hair, Frey's ship Skíðbladnir, Odin's spear Gungnir, Frey's golden boar, and Thor's hammer, it was made by the dwarfs. Along with the boar and the hammer, Draupnir is one of three treasures forged by Eitri while Loki in the form of a fly pestered Brokk, who was working the bellows.

Draupnir has truly been to Hel and back, for Snorri says, in his account of Baldr's death, that when Hermód leaves the realm of the dead after having acquired Hel's consent to release Baldr if all creation will weep, he takes with him Draupnir, sent by Baldr to Odin as a memorial. Indeed, *Skáldskaparmál* lists among Baldr kennings "owner of Draupnir," and the passage of Draupnir through funeral fire and the world of the dead must truly have enhanced its value.

*See also* Brokk; Eitri; Odin

## **DRÓMI**

*See* **FENRIR**

## **DUNEYR**

According to *Grímnismál*, stanza 33 (and therefore Snorri in *Gylfaginning*), one of the four harts that gnaws on Yggdrasil.

The name appears to mean "dark-ear."

*See also* Dáin; Durathrór; Yggdrasil

## **DURATHRÓR**

According to *Grímnismál*, stanza 33 (and therefore Snorri in *Gylfaginning*), one of the four harts that gnaws on Yggdrasil.

The meaning of the name is unclear.

*See also* Dáin; Duneyr; Yggdrasil

## **DVALIN (DELAYED)**

Dwarf name; also according to *Grímnismál*, stanza 33 (and therefore Snorri in *Gylfaginning*), one of the four harts that gnaws on Yggdrasil.

Dvalin is mentioned in stanza 11 of *Völuspá* in the catalog of dwarfs, then again in stanza 17, as the catalog of dwarfs is drawing to a close, when the "dwarfs in

Dvalin's group" are mentioned. In stanza 145 of *Hávamál*, Dvalin stands as a representative of the dwarfs, along with Odin for the æsir, Dáin for the elves, and Alsvinn for the giants. According to stanza 16 of *Alvíssmál*, the dwarfs call the sun "Dvalin's deluder" (or so the expression is understood, as a reference to the sun turning dwarfs to stone). When, then, *Fáfnismál*, stanza 13, says that some of the norns are of the family of the æsir, some are of the elves, and some are the daughters of Dvalin, it seems apparent that the dwarfs are what is meant. The skalds often used "Dvalin's drink" or something similar as a kenning for poetry, clearly because the mead of poetry had at one time been in the possession of dwarfs. Finally, Dvalin is the name of one of the dwarfs to whom Freyja gave herself in *Sörla tháttir* in exchange for a golden necklace, presumably the *Brísinga men*. Dvalin is, then, one of the most common of the dwarf names. Why he should be "delayed" is not clear.

As for the hart, the thulur list "Dvalar" as a hart name, but not "Dvalin," and some observers think that the hart who gnaws at Yggdrasil should be Dvalar.

*See also* Dwarfs

## DWARFS

Mythological beings.

*Völuspá* turns its attention to the dwarfs just after the æsir have created the cosmos, arranged for time reckoning, and acquired gold. The æsir were blissful "until three came, / giant maidens, / very powerful, / out of Jötunheimar" (stanza 8). For the first of several times in the poem, when crisis threatens, the gods repair to their "judgment seats." On this occasion they consider "which dwarfs are to create a lord" (*Codex Regius*) or "who is to create troops of dwarfs" (*Hauksbók*) "out of bloody surf and out of dark limbs" (*Codex Regius*). The passage is difficult, and the editions ordinarily render it as something like "who should create a lord of dwarfs out of the blood of Brimir and out of the limbs of Bláin." The following stanza, however, is clear:

There Mótsognir had  
become the foremost  
of all dwarfs,  
and Durinn the second;  
human likenesses they  
made many, those dwarfs, out of earth,  
as Durinn told.

There follows a catalog of dwarfs that takes up several stanzas. Thus *Völuspá* actually has more information on dwarfs than on the gods. The names

in this and other catalogs of dwarfs suggest something about their characteristics: They are associated with the dead, with battle, with wisdom, with craftsmanship, with the supernatural, and even to some extent with the elves.

It is not clear why the arrival of giant maidens in *Völuspá* should provoke a crisis involving the dwarfs. However, the response appears to have something to do with the creation of order in the already existing community of dwarfs, or the creation of troops of dwarfs themselves. What these dwarfs do is to create “human likenesses,” and it is not implausible that these are the human beings whom the *æsir* will endow with the characteristics of life. Perhaps the arrival of giant maidens made it clear that humans would be needed, since dead human warriors make up the ranks of the *einherjar* who will fight alongside Odin against the forces of chaos.

Certainly the fashioning of “human likenesses” is consistent with the general picture in the mythology of dwarfs as craftsmen. According to Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*, the dwarfs Fjalar and Galar made the mead of poetry out of the blood of Kvasir. Mostly, however, the dwarfs make objects. Snorri also tells in *Skáldskaparmál* of the creation of some of the most important and precious possessions of the gods. Loki had cut the hair off Sif, Thor’s wife, and Loki avoided a beating only by promising to have the dwarfs make for Sif a headpiece that would grow into golden hair. He has the sons of Ívaldi make the headpiece, and also the ship *Skíðbladnir* and Odin’s spear, *Gungnir*. Then he bets the dwarf Brokk that Brokk’s brother Eitri cannot make three equally good objects. Brokk is to work the bellows for Eitri, and Loki changes himself into a fly and pesters Brokk. Eitri makes first a boar with gold bristles, then the ring *Draupnir*, and finally *Mjöllnir*, Thor’s hammer. The hammer’s handle is short because Brokk’s bellows work was nearly interrupted when the fly bit him between the eyes so that blood flowed.

Thus, if we assign Sif’s hair to the realm of Thor, each of the three major gods gets two objects. Odin gets his spear, which he can use to throw an enemy army into panic, and the ring that duplicates itself in multiple copies. Thor gets the hammer with which he kills giants, and Frey gets the ship that can be folded up and put in a pocket and the gold-bristled boar, *Gullinborsti*. It may be worth noting that each god gets one object of gold and one of iron or wood. Furthermore, Odin commissioned the dwarfs to make the fetter *Gleipnir*, which he used to bind Fenrir. And when Odin, Hœnir, and Loki needed gold to compensate Hreidmar for the death of his son Otr in *Skáldskaparmál*, it was to the dwarfs that Odin sent Loki. Like the male gods, Freyja also had precious objects fashioned by the dwarfs: She had her own gold-bristled boar (*Hyndluljóð*, stanza 7) and obtained a necklace (*Sörla tháttr*, which is probably a rather late text), perhaps the *Brísinga men*. Besides making precious objects for the gods, the dwarfs may also have supported them with magic. According to *Hávamál*, stanza 160,

Odin learned a charm first sung by the dwarf Thjóðrörir: “[H]e sang wealth for the æsir, / and prosperity for the elves, / mind for Hroptatýr.” Hroptatýr is Odin, and to have endowed him with mind would be a great gift.

However, in the overall scheme of Scandinavian mythology, the dwarfs appear to occupy a position closer to that of the giants than to some kind of allies of the gods. The flow of goods is always from the dwarfs to the gods, never the reverse, and sometimes hostilities are involved, as when Loki gets gold from Andvari to compensate Hreidmar for the death of Otr. Alvíss wishes to marry Thor’s daughter and winds up dead for this presumption (*Alvíssmál*), just as did the giants Thrym and Thjazi, who coveted Freyja and Idun (Freyja did, however, apparently sleep with some dwarfs to get her necklace in *Sörla thátttr*). The poet Thjóðólfr of Hvin said in his *Ynglinga tal* (stanza 5) that a dwarf tricked the Swedish king Sveigdir, when the king jumped into the rock after the dwarf, and “the bright hall of Sökmímir and his people, inhabited by giants [jötнар], gaped open.” Paraphrasing the poem in *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri tells us that the king Sveigdir one evening after sundown at a farm called Steinn (Stone) saw a dwarf sitting by the stone and was summoned into the stone by the dwarf, never to return.

The conception of dwarfs as dwelling in the earth or in rocks or mountains is deeply rooted. Alvíss tells Thor that he lives down under the earth, under a stone. When Odin sent for the fetter Gleipnir, the direction was down. Here, however, and in *Skáldskaparmál* as well, in the story of the acquisition of gold from Andvari, Snorri calls the destination Svartálfaheim (world of the black-elves), which suggests that for him the category of elves and dwarfs was somewhat blurred.

Snorri tells us in *Gylfaginning* that the dwarfs originated as maggots in the flesh of the proto-giant Ymir, whose body the gods used to fashion the cosmos. Snorri also gives dwarfs a cosmological function and equates them with the cardinal directions when he writes that the dwarfs Nordri (North), Sudri (South), Austri (East), and Vestri (West) hold up the sky.

In later medieval Icelandic literature dwarfs appear as stereotypical figures similar to those in medieval literature elsewhere in Europe.

*See also* *Alvíssmál*; *Völuspá*

**References and further reading:** On the names of the dwarfs and their implications, see Chester N. Gould, “Dwarf-Names in Old Icelandic,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 44 (1929): 949–967, and Lotte Motz, “New Thoughts on Dwarf-Names in Old Icelandic.” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 7 (1973): 100–117 (with an epilogue by Dietrich Hoffmann). Motz also contributed several other studies of dwarfs: “Of Elves and Dwarfs,” *Arv* 29–30 (1973–1974): 93–127; “The Craftsman in the Mound,” *Folklore* 88 (1977): 46–60; and *The Wise One of the Mountain: A Study in Folklore*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 379 (Göttingen: Kümmerle, 1983).

**EGGTHÉR**

In *Völuspá*, stanza 42, the herdsman of a giantess:

He sat there on a mound and played a harp,  
The herdsman of a giantess, happy Eggthér.

The giantess in question might be the one from stanza 40, who raised the brood of Fenrir in Járnvid (Iron-woods), possibly therefore Angrboda. Why anyone working for her would be happy is unexplained; perhaps Eggthér was especially fond of the harp. In any case, his name is identical to that of Ecgtheow, who in the Old English epic *Beowulf* is the father of Beowulf. Andy Orchard, in his *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, says that this parallel “is almost certainly a red herring,” a statement with which I agree.

**References and further reading:** Peter H. Salus and Paul Beekman Talyer, “Eikin-skjaldi, Fjalar, and Eggthér,” *Neophilologus* 53 (1969): 76–81. Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1997), 35.

**EGIL**

According to *Hymiskvida*, stanza 7, the one who looked after Thor’s goats while Thor was visiting Hymir; possibly the father of Thor’s human servants Thjálfi and Röskva.

The surmise concerning Thjálfi and Röskva is based on *Hymiskvida*, stanza 37, the third from last stanza in the poem and the one that follows Thor’s acquisition of the kettle and killing of the pursuing giants. Parts of it are difficult, especially in the third line, but it means something like this:

They went for a long time, before lay down  
Hlorridi’s [Thor’s] goat, half dead, in front;  
The team-mate of the trace was limping on its leg;  
And the crafty Loki caused it.

According to *Gylfaginning*, when Thor and Loki set off on the visit to Jötunheimar that would take them to Útgarda-Loki, they stopped for the night at a farmer’s house. Thor killed and cooked his goats and then revived them next morning. One was lame, because Thjálfi had broken it to get at the marrow. Those who are able to put aside the different destinations of the two trips and the differing roles of Loki (he did not accompany Thor in *Hymiskvida*, and he was not responsible for the laming in *Gylfaginning*) and who like to sew things up neatly will find attractive the possibility of linking Egil to Thjálfi and Röskva.

Egil was a common given name in medieval Scandinavia. One Egil turns up as the brother of Völund, and another is the subject of one of the grandest of the sagas of Icelanders.

*See also* Thjálfí; Útgarda-Loki

### EIKINSKJALDI (WITH-AN-OAKEN-SHIELD)

Dwarf name, found in *Völuspá*, stanzas 13 and 16.

*See also* Dwarfs

**References and further reading:** Peter H. Salus and Paul Beekman Taylor, "Eikinskjaldi, Fjalar, and Eggthér," *Neophilologus* 53 (1969): 76–81.

### EIKTHYRNIR (OAK-ENCIRCLER)

Hart that nibbles on the leaves of Yggdrasil, the world tree.

The major source is *Grímnismál*, stanza 26:

Eikthyrnir is the name of a hart, who stands at the hall of Herjafödr [Odin]  
 And bites from the limbs of Lærad.  
 Yet from his horns it drips into Hvergelmir,  
 Thence all waters have their ways.

In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri paraphrases this stanza nearly verbatim, at least for the first half, but he clarifies the last line to mean a bunch of rivers, which he names.

*See also* Lærad; Yggdrasil

**References and further reading:** The high water mark for Eikthyrnir studies (and also the only year in which anything significant has ever appeared) was 1917: Axel Olrik, "Yggdrasil," *Danske studier* 14 (1917): 49–62, used the confluence of oak tree and large stag to assign the provenance of Yggdrasil to Denmark or western Norway. Uno Holmberg (Harva), "Valhall och världsträdet," *Finsk tidskrift för vitterhet, vetenskap, konst och politik* 48 (1917): 349–377, thought that Eikthyrnir was an Icelandic invention based on the constellation Ursa Major.

### EIN(D)RIDI (LONE-RIDER)

Thor name.

The name is found in stanza 19 of the *Haustlög* of Thjóðólf of Hvin, one of the very earliest skalds, in the scene in Thor's duel with Hrungnir in which the whetstone is lodged in the god's head. Elsewhere in this stanza Einridi is called both earth's son and Odin's son. It is also found in the *Vellekla* of Einar Helga-



son skálaglamm, a poem in praise of Hákon the Hladir jarl, probably from around 975–985 c.e. In this stanza he refers to the temple lands of Einridi and all the gods (*bönd*).

The form with *d* in the second syllable is younger. My translation of the name (either form) is what I think a Norseman would have thought it meant; some scholars have thought that etymologically it may originally have meant “lone ruler.” It is worth noting that this name is attested on rune stones for human beings, who may therefore have been named after the god.

*See also* Hlórridi; Thor

### **EINHERJAR (LONE-FIGHTERS)**

The chosen warriors of Odin, who sport at Valhöll awaiting the last battle at Ragnarök.

*Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 41, describes life at Valhöll:

All the einherjar in Odin's fields  
Hack each other each day.  
They choose slaughter and ride from the field  
Later sit reconciled together.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 18, says that the einherjar are nourished on Sæhrímnir, cooked in Eldhrímnir by Andhrímnir. Stanza 23 says that 800 einherjar go out of each of the doors of Valhöll. Stanza 36 lists the valkyries who bring beer to them. At the end of the poem, when Odin reveals his identity to Geirröd, Odin tells him that he has lost the grace of all the einherjar and of Odin.

The anonymous *Eiríksmál*, from the second half of the tenth century, describes Valhöll and puts the einherjar there. Indeed, stanza 1 has Odin dream that he awakened the einherjar and bade them prepare for an honored guest. The similar poem *Hákonarmál*, attributed to Eyvind Finnsson skáldaspillir, also mentions the einherjar: Odin tells the retinue of Hákon the Good, as they are arriving in Valhöll, that they shall have a truce with the einherjar and invites them to drink beer.

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri uses and expands on these sources, adding, among other things, that the einherjar are “all those men who have fallen in battle since the beginning of the world.” He also sends the einherjar out against the forces of chaos at the last battle but gives no details of their fights and fates.

The emphasis in the sources is twofold: the eternal fighting and revival of the einherjar, and their special relationship with Odin, which is manifested in part by their feasting endlessly with him and in part by their sharing in his grace.

Many scholars think there may be a basis for the myth in an ancient Odin cult, which would have centered on young warriors who entered into an ecstatic relationship with Odin. Sometimes this notion is juxtaposed to the description in the *Germania* of Tacitus, chapter 43, of an army of the dead. The people are called the Harii, a name that some say is etymologically related to *-herjar* in *einherjar*. In *Lokasenna*, stanza 60, Loki addresses Thor as *einheri*, the singular of *einherjar* and the only time the singular is attested. Thor certainly has a special relationship with Odin, as his son with Jörd.

*See also* Andhrímnir; Eldhrímnir; Odin; Sæhrímnir; Valhöll

**References and further reading:** The notion of an ecstatic Odin cult was best articulated by Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt: M. Diesterweg, 1934) and numerous later works. A more recent take is that of Bruce Lincoln, articulated in his *Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 122–133. A credible alternative etymology of *einherjar*, proposing that the word meant “peerless warriors,” is in Lennart Elmevik, “Fisl. *einherjar* ‘krigare i Valhall’ och några andra fornnord. sammansättningar med *-ein*,” *Saga och sed*, 1982: 75–84.

## EIR

Minor goddess.

Snorri lists Eir third in his catalog in *Gylfaginning* of goddesses among the *æsir* and calls her “best of physicians.” Her name is identical with the noun *eir*, “peace, clemency.” Eir plays no role in the mythology, but in *Fjölsvinnsmál*, stanza 38, Eir is found in a list of the maidens who serve Menglöd; none of the others is a deity, and many are just feminine adjectives (“bright,” “happy,” “fair”). Eir is listed among the names of valkyries in the *thulur*, but not among those of the goddesses. The name is common as a base word in skaldic kennings, but whether we should trust Snorri and imagine the existence of a goddess Eir is problematic.

## EIRÍKSMÁL

Anonymous poem composed after the death of King Eirík Bloodaxe at the battle of Stainmoor, Westmoreland, England in 954, recounting his glorious arrival in Valhöll. The poem as we have it is only nine stanzas, and two different meters are used. Nevertheless, it appears to offer a picture of Valhöll that actually was rooted in late paganism. The poem begins with Odin recounting a dream: He thought he awoke early and bade the *einherjar* and valkyries prepare Valhöll for the arrival of a great ruler. He asks Bragi what great noise resounds, as though Baldr himself were returning to the hall. But it is Eirík Bloodaxe, and Odin bids the heroes

Sigmund and Sinfjötli arise and invite the guest into the hall, if it is Eirík. Bragi asks why Odin thinks it is Eirík, and Odin responds that the guest has reddened his sword in many a land. Why deprive such a great king of victory, asks Bragi. Because, Odin answers, one can never know—the gray wolf gazes upon the abodes of the gods. Eirík now arrives and is welcomed into the hall and asked who accompanies him. Five kings, he says. Here the poem ends.

The mythological details are familiar: Einherjar and valkyries inhabit Valhöll, and Baldr is missing. Bragi here is presumably to be regarded as the human poet, for the poem specifically mentions also the human heroes Sigmund and Sinfjötli, and, of course, Eirík; the five kings who accompany him have not been identified with any certainty. The poet explains why it is that a warrior favored by Odin might be defeated in battle, and he implies that Ragnarök may be near, or at least that in tenth-century Denmark Odin was consciously gathering troops for the final battle.

*See also* *Hákonarmál*

**References and further reading:** The literary relationship between *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* is discussed by Klaus von See, “Zwei eddische Preislieder,” in *Festgabe Ulrich Pretzel zum 65. Geburtstag dargebracht von seinen Freunden und Schülern*, ed. Walter Simon, Wolfgang Bachofer, and Wolfgang Dittmann (Berlin: Schmidt, 1963), 107–117. Edith Marold, “Das Walhallbild in den *Eiríksmál* und *Hákonarmál*,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 5 (1972): 19–33, acknowledges that the portrait of Valhöll in *Hákonarmál* is darker and conceivably more archaic than that of *Eiríksmál* and analyzes especially the duality of the conceptions in *Hákonarmál*. Axel Seeberg treats the identity of those who accompany Eirík to Valhöll in “Five Kings,” *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 20 (1979–1980): 106–113.

## EISTLA

One of nine giant mothers, perhaps of Heimdall, listed in *Hyndluljóð*, stanza 37 (part of the “Short *Völuspá*”).

*See also* Heimdall; *Hyndluljóð*

**References and further reading:** Lotte Motz, “Giantesses and Their Names,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981): 495–511.

## EITRI

Dwarf; helped create some of the precious objects of the gods.

Snorri tells the story in *Skáldskaparmál*. Loki had cut the hair off Sif, Thor’s wife, and he avoided a beating only by promising to have the dwarfs make for Sif a headpiece that would grow into golden hair. After having the sons of Ívaldi make the headpiece, and also the ship *Skíðbladnir* and Odin’s spear, *Gungnir*, he

bets the dwarf Brokk that Brokk's brother Eitri cannot make three equally good objects. Brokk is to work the bellows for Eitri, and Loki changes himself into a fly and pesters Brokk. Eitri makes first a boar with gold bristles, then the ring Draupnir, finally Mjöllnir, Thor's hammer. The hammer's handle is short because Brokk's bellows work was interrupted when the fly bit him between the eyes so that blood flowed.

Eitri is known from no other source.

*See also* Dwarfs

### ELDHRÍMNIR (FIRE-SOOTY)

Cookpot at Valhöll.

The key passage is stanza 18 of *Grímnismál*.

Andhrímnir in Eldhrímnir

Has Sæhrímnir boiled.

In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri understands the passage as a cook (Andhrímnir) cooking pork (the pig Sæhrímnir) in a huge pot (Eldhrímnir), and indeed the rest of this stanza seems to call Sæhrímnir the best of pork and refers to the mysterious nourishment of the einherjar. All three of the names are joined by the element *hrímnir*, which is derived from the word for soot on a cookpot. "Fire-sooty" as the cookpot is the most appropriate of the three.

*See also* Andhrímnir; Sæhrímnir

### ELDIR

Servant of Ægir; Loki's first verbal opponent in *Lokasenna*.

The prose header to *Lokasenna* says that people greatly praised Ægir's two servants (who cannot have had much to do, as the beer carried itself into the hall), and out of jealousy Loki killed one of them, Fimafeng. After the gods chased him off to the forest, Loki returned and confronted Eldir. Their exchange makes up the first five stanzas of the poem. Loki asks what the æsir are discussing in the hall (stanza 1) and Eldir replies that they are judging their weapons and prowess. No one, he says, is a friend of Loki's in words (has good things to say to or about Loki) (stanza 2). Loki declares his intention to enter the hall and blend mead with harmful or sinister power (stanza 3). Stanzas 4–5 appear to be Eldir's challenge to Loki, rebuffed:

4. [Eldir:] You know, if you enter Ægir's hall,  
To gaze on that feast,

If slander and calumny you pour into the hall of the æsir,  
 On you they will dry it.  
 5. [Loki:]You know, Eldir, if we two alone should  
 Contend with harmful words,  
 Rich will I be in answers  
 If you speak much about it.

This silences Eldir, and Loki enters the hall.

Eldir fits the character type of the outer guardian, often a herdsman as in *Skírnismál*, stanzas 11–16, with whom someone contends before entering a place for the main confrontation.

*See also Lokasenna*

### ÉLIVÁGAR (HAILSTORM-WAVES)

Mythic rivers, associated with the proto-giant Aurgelmir/Ymir or with the ends of the world.

The association with the proto-giant is explicit in *Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 31. Odin has asked Vafthrúdnir whence came Aurgelmir, the oldest being according to stanza 29, among the giants. Vafthrúdnir replies:

From the Élivágar spurted poison drops,  
 Thus it grew, until a giant emerged.

Snorri says that Aurgelmir is the name Ymir bore among the giants and expands considerably on the above stanza, which must have been at least part of his source. Hár is the speaker of this section, and he is responding to this question from Gylfi/Gangleri: “How was it arranged, before clans came into being or mankind was increased?”

Those rivers which are called the Élivágar, when they had come so far from their source that the fermentation that accompanied them there, hardened like the slag that runs out of fires, as it was freezing, and when the ice stopped and froze solid, and that drizzling rain that arose from the poison, froze into frost, and the frost grew over all Ginnunga gap.

The discussion now turns to Ginnunga gap and Ymir’s eventual emergence from it.

Most editors read “fermentation” as “poisonous yeast” to make the passage accord better with *Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 29. But there is still a substantial difference between the two accounts, a vast gap between the two lines of *Vafthrúd-*

*nismál* that is filled by the detail leading to Ginnunga gap. In Snorri's account, then, the Élivágar preceded even Ginnunga gap and were the first fixed point in the cosmos, although he never mentions them again.

*Hymiskvida* gives us good reason to think that the Élivágar were located on the periphery of the mythological world. Toward the beginning of the poem, as the gods ponder how they are to obtain the kettle to brew beer for Ægir's party, Týr gives Thor a "great loving counsel," in stanza 5:

There dwells east of the Élivágar  
Exceedingly wise Hymir, at the edge of heaven.  
My father, the powerful one, owns a kettle,  
A huge pot, a league deep.

Finally there is the curious set of stanzas found in *Bergbúa thátttr*, a thirteenth-century account of one Thórd and his servant who get lost on his way to church in winter and take shelter for the night in a cave. There they hear the supernatural inhabitant of the cave recite a poem predicting various cataclysmic events. In the seventh (of twelve) stanzas, the poet says that he travels north down into the third netherworld, and there someone fears his arrival at the Élivágar. The poem is sometimes difficult to understand, but here at least the peripheral location of the Élivágar is assured.

There is little useful direct discussion of the Élivágar, but it is clear that they are meant to be far removed in time, space, or both.

*See also* Aurgelmir; *Bergbúa thátttr*; *Hymiskvida*; Ymir

### ELLI (OLD-AGE)

Old woman with whom Thor wrestles when he visits Útgarda-Loki.

Thor is unable to throw Elli, and in the end he loses the match when one of his knees touches down. Only later does Útgarda-Loki explain that Thor's performance was extraordinary, for Old Age could only make him kneel. Elli is found only in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*.

*See also* Útgarda-Loki

### ELVES

Medieval Icelandic *álfar*, sg. *álf*, mythological beings.

The formula "æsir and elves" is a commonplace in eddic poetry, and as Ragnarök approaches in *Völuspá*, the seeress asks "What's with the æsir? / What's with the elves?" This same line is echoed in *Thrymskvida*. Despite this usage, however,

and despite the appearance of the elves in other lists of mythological beings, such as those in *Alvíssmál*, where vocabulary items of the mythological races are cataloged, little concrete is known about them. The only important figure explicitly assigned to the elves is Völund: The eddic poem *Völundarkvida* calls him prince of the álfar (stanzas 13 and 32), and “countryman of the álfar” (stanza 10). But he has no interaction with elves in or outside of the poem, and although he does marry a swan maiden and fly off on wings at the end of the poem, his skill as a smith would suggest association with the dwarfs, as his cognate Wayland the Smith confirms. Nor does Völund have any contact with the gods or giants of the mythology; his story as we have it belongs to heroic poetry, even though the person who arranged the *Poetic Edda* as we have it put it before *Alvíssmál*. There Thor indeed plays a role, but so does a dwarf. In fact, the word *álfr* appears by itself as a dwarf name in lists of such names and is compounded with other nouns to make other dwarf names in medieval Icelandic tradition. Besides Völund, the only other explicitly named elf is Dáin (*Hávamál*, stanza 143), and that too is more frequently found as a dwarf name.

Snorri introduces in *Gylfaginning* a distinction between light-elves and dark-elves. “There is yet that place, which is called Álfheim (Elf-world); there lives that people, which is called the light-elves, but the dark-elves dwell down in the earth, and they are unlike in appearance and much more unlike in experience. The light-elves are fairer than the sun in appearance, but the dark-elves are blacker than pitch.” A few lines later, Snorri has Hár tell Gylfi/Gangleri that there are three heavens, the highest of which the light-elves alone inhabit. Insofar as they live in the earth, the dark-elves would appear to be similar, or more likely identical to, the dwarfs. Twice Snorri says the dwarfs live in Svartálfaheim (World-of-the-black-elves), and whether he intended a distinction between the dark-elves and black-elves is unknown, as in fact is any distinction among the elves outside of Snorri.

The relative lack of information about the elves in the mythology is made more tantalizing by the references retained in medieval Icelandic tradition to the *álfablót*. In recent Scandinavian folklore elves are important as supernatural nature beings in Danish and Icelandic tradition.

*See also* Æsir; *Álfablót*; Álfheim; Völund

**References and further reading:** Two readable treatments in English are those of Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “Folk Narrative and Norse Mythology,” *Arv* 46 (1989): 115–122 (reprinted as “Giants and Elves in Mythology and Folktales,” in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual, and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources*, 129–139 (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1998), and Lotte Motz, “Of Elves and Dwarfs,” *Arv* 29–30 (1973–1974): 93–127.

**EYRGJAJA**

One of nine giant mothers, perhaps of Heimdall, listed in *Hyndluljóð*, stanza 37 (part of the “Short *Völuspá*”).

*See also* Heimdall; *Hyndluljóð*

**References and further reading:** Lotte Motz, “Giantesses and Their Names,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981): 495–511.

**FALHÓFNIR (PALE-HOOFED)**

Horse name found in *Grímnismál*, stanza 30, which lists the horses the æsir ride each day when they go to make judgments at Yggdrasil.

Snorri Sturluson includes Falhófnir in his list of the horses of the æsir in *Gylfaginning* but does not assign the horse to any specific god. Falhófnir is also listed in the *thulur* for horses.

**FÁRBAUTI (ANGER-STRIKER)**

Loki’s father.

Two tenth-century skalds call Loki son of Fárbauti (using, however, the poetic word *mögr* for “son” rather than the usual *sonr*), so the genealogy is assured. When introducing Loki in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri tells us that Loki is the son of Fárbauti the giant, and there is no reason to doubt the assignment of Fárbauti to the giants, especially given the meaning of his name. Doubtless Loki’s ill will toward the æsir had to do with his father’s affiliation.

*See also* Laufey; Loki

**FENRIR**

Wolf; enemy of the gods.

Fenrir is also called Fenrisúlf, that is, the wolf of Fenrir, and this usage has never been satisfactorily explained. He has two roles in the mythology: one as the maimer of Týr early in the mythic present, the other as the killer of Odin at Ragnarök. In between, he lies bound.

*Hyndluljóð*, stanza 40, a part of the “Short *Völuspá*,” states that Loki sired the (or a) wolf on Angrboda, and Snorri agrees that Fenrir is the offspring of Loki and this giantess and that their brood also included Jörmungand (the Midgard serpent) and Hel. The wolf’s great act in the mythological present is to deprive Týr of his right hand, an event alluded to directly in *Lokasenna*, stanza 38. Loki is upbraiding Týr:

Shut up, Týr. You never knew how  
To mediate something good between two people



Your right hand, that one will I mention  
Which Fenrir tore from you.

“To mediate something good between two people” is the standard translation, but an attractive alternative, given what happens next, would be “to carry something well with two [hands].”

Snorri tells the myth twice in *Gylfaginning*. On the first occasion, he is describing Týr and cites the episode as a token of Týr’s bravery:

When the æsir enticed the wolf of Fenrir to permit the fetter to be put on him, then he did not believe that they would release him, until they placed the hand of Týr as a pledge in his mouth. And when the æsir were unwilling to release him, then he bit the hand off, where it is now called the “wolf’s joint” [wrist], and Týr is one-handed and not called a peacemaker.

A few pages later Snorri tells the full story. When the gods learned that Loki’s evil offspring with Angrboda were being raised in Jötunheimar, they discovered through prophecy that this brood would be trouble for them, and Odin had them brought to him. He cast the Midgard serpent into the sea and Hel into the world of the dead. For reasons that are unclear (because Odin had a connection with wolves? Because Loki was Odin’s blood brother?), the gods raised the wolf with them, and only Týr was brave enough to feed it. But when they saw how quickly it was growing and reconsidered the prophecies, they decided to bind the wolf. First they brought a great fetter called Løding, but Fenrir allowed them to bind him with it and burst it with his first movements. Next the gods got a stronger fetter, Drómi, and following a thought process that in English is reflected in the proverb “Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” the wolf allowed them to bind him with that fetter and burst it into bits. For this reason, Snorri tells us, there are proverbs “to loose oneself from Løding” and “to break out of Drómi;” neither, however, has left any other trace. The gods now turned to magic. Alfödr (Odin) sent Skírnir to the dwarfs to obtain a fetter, Gleipnir (perhaps “Entangler”), made from cat noise and woman beard and mountain roots and bear sinews and fish breath and bird spittle. On the island Lyngvi (Heathery) in the lake Ámsvartnir (Red-black), they invited the wolf to let himself be bound again. Needless to say, the wolf was suspicious. What renown could there be in bursting this fetter, which looked like a silken band? Fenrir stipulated that someone had to place a hand in his mouth.

And each of the æsir looked at another and thought that now their troubles had doubled, but none would put forth his hand, until Týr stretched forth his right hand and put it into the mouth of the wolf. And when the wolf moved, then the

fetter hardened, and the more he struggled, the sharper it became. Then all the gods laughed except Týr; he lost his hand.

*Lokasenna*, stanzas 37–40, comprise an exchange between Týr and Loki. Loki boasts that Fenrir tore off Týr's arm; Týr responds that although he may be missing his hand, Loki is missing Hródrsvitnir, that is, the famous wolf, Fenrir. *Málsháttakvæði*, a poem of the twelfth or thirteenth century and usually thought to have been composed in the Orkneys, is the only poem to refer to the binding of Fenrir. It has been argued that Týr and Fenrir appear on the eighth-century Alskog Tjängvide picture stone from Gotland.

*Vafthrúdnismál* gives information about the wolf's further career. Toward the end of the poem Odin is asking about the aftermath of Ragnarök, and he poses this question to Vafthrúdnir:

Whence will come the sun into the smooth heaven,  
After Fenrir has destroyed it?

In describing the sun and moon, Snorri says in *Gylfaginning* that the sun is ultimately to be swallowed by a wolf called Sköll. When he comes to Ragnarök, Snorri says simply that a wolf swallows the sun, and another the moon, and it is apparent that he regards neither of these as identical to Fenrir, for only after describing the swallowing of the sun and moon and a devastating earthquake does he report that Fenrir has gotten loose. But Fenrir's subsequent action echoes the swallowing of the heavenly bodies, for he "goes about with a gaping mouth, and the lower jaw is on the earth and the upper against the sky—he would gape wider if there were room—fires burn from his eyes and nostrils."

In the series of duels that make up the gods' last stand against the forces of chaos, Odin fights with and is killed by Fenrir. *Völuspá*, stanza 53, reads:

Then the second sorrow of Hlín [Frigg] occurs,  
When Odin goes to fight with the wolf.

*Völuspá* gives no details on Odin's death, only on the subsequent vengeance:

Then comes the great son of Sigfather [Odin];  
Vidar, to fight with the beast of battle;  
For the son of Hvedrung, he makes stand with his hand  
A sword in the heart; thus the father is avenged.

Hvedrung is surely Loki, since *Ynglinga tal*, stanza 32, refers to Hel as Hvedrung's daughter. It is also to be found among the thulur as a word for giant, and, confusingly, as an Odin name.

*Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 53, also tells of Odin's death in the jaws of the wolf of Vídar's vengeance. Odin has just asked Vafthrúdnir about Odin's fate.

The wolf will swallow Aldafödr [Odin]  
Vídar will avenge this;  
The malevolent jaws he will cleave  
At the death of the wolf.

Snorri agrees that Fenrir swallows Odin and goes on to describe the vengeance thus:

Immediately thereafter Vídar will come forth and put one foot on the lower jaw of the wolf. . . . With one hand he will take hold of the upper jaw of the wolf and tear apart his gullet, and that will be the death of the wolf.

Like his father Loki and his brother the Midgard serpent, then, Fenrir is a creature who spends time among the gods, is bound or cast out by them, and returns at the end of the current mythic order to destroy them, only to be destroyed himself as a younger generation of gods, one of them his slayer, survives into the new world order.

**See also** Hel; Midgard Serpent; Vídar

**References and further reading:** The alternative translation of *Lokasenna*, stanza 38, is discussed by Alfred Jakobsen, "*Bera tilt með tveim: Til tolkning av Lokasenna 38,*" *Maal og minne*, 1979: 34–39, reprinted in his *Studier i norrøn filologi* ([Trondheim:] Tapir, 1979), 43–48. On the Alskog Tjängvide picture stone from Gotland, see Karl Helm, "Zu den gotländischen Bildsteinen," *Beiträge zur deutschen Geschichte und Literatur* 62 (1938): 357–361.

### **FENSALIR (BOG-HALLS)**

The abode of Frigg.

The assignment of Fensalir to Frigg is based on a poignant stanza in *Völuspá*, stanza 33 (not found in the late *Hauksbók* version of the poem). The poet is telling us that vengeance will be taken for Baldr's killing, "and yet Frigg weeps over Valhöll's woe at Fensalir." Cruelly, Snorri says in *Gylfaginning* that it was at Fensalir that Loki wheedled the information from Frigg about Baldr's vulnerability to mistletoe; earlier he had said that Frigg lives at Fensalir, "and it is most esteemed." In *Skáldskaparmál* he says that Frigg may be called "Ruler of Fensalir." I have no idea why Frigg should live in a boggy place, despite the old argument that there is an association with a cult situated at a spring.

**See also** Frigg

**References and further reading:** The notion of a spring cult was advanced by A. Edzardi, "Fensalir und Vegtamskviq 12, 5ff," *Germania* 27 (1882): 330–339.

### FIMAFENG

Servant of Ægir, killed by Loki according to the prose header to *Lokasenna* and Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*.

According to the prose header to *Lokasenna*, Loki could not bear to hear people praise Fimafeng and Ægir's other servant, Eldir, and so he killed Fimafeng. For this outrage he was driven off into the forest. Immediate vengeance was impossible, since the site of the feast was a "great place of sanctuary." Fimafeng might mean something like "hurrying service."

*See also* Eldir; *Lokasenna*

### FIMBUL-

Adjective meaning "mighty," found only in mythological contexts.

*Völuspá*, stanza 60, refers to the ancient runes of Fimbultýr (Mighty-god), who must be Odin. Stanzas 80 and 142 of *Hávamál* refer to a *fimbulthulr*, "mighty sage or poet," who again is Odin. *Grímnismál*, stanza 27, has a list of mythological rivers, including Fimbulthul (Mighty-roar?). The most important of the *fimbul-* words is Fimbulvetr (Mighty-winter), which is to occur at the onset of Ragnarök.

Finally there is Fimbulkambi, mentioned at the end of *Hávamál*, stanza 103:

He is called Fimbulkambi, who can say little,  
That is the nature of an unwise man.

I call this a mythological context, despite the sententious nature of the lines, because they stand between the Billing's girl and Gunnlöð episodes in the poem. In the first Odin fails to get a woman; in the second he succeeds. Odin is a master of seduction and of words, and everyone else is a fimbul-fool.

*See also* Billing's Girl; Gunnlöð; *Hávamál*

### FJALAR (DECEIVER)

One of the most-used names in the mythology, presumably because of all the deception that goes on.

*Völuspá* appears to have two beings called Fjalar, the first occurring in the catalog of dwarfs, the second, in stanza 42, a beautiful red rooster that crowed near

the happy harping herdsman Eggthér at the onset of Ragnarök. In *Hávamál*, stanza 14, Fjalar the Learned is a host whose beer the speaker (Odin?) got drunk on. In *Hárbarðsljóð*, stanza 26, Odin is chiding Thor about the latter's misadventures with the giant Skrymir on the journey to Útgarda-Loki and says that Thor did not dare sneeze or fart, lest Fjalar—presumably Skrymir—were to hear it. The most important Fjalar is one of the two dwarfs who killed Kvasir and made the mead of poetry from his blood, according to Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*.

If we take *Hávamál*, stanza 14, as a reference to Odin's consumption of the mead of poetry, we are left with Fjalar the dwarf, Fjalar the rooster, and Fjalar as Skrymir. In the last case it is tempting to think of the name simply as a noun, "deceiver," to refer to the shape-changing Skrymir.

*See also* Mead of Poetry; Ragnarök; Útgarda-Loki

**References and further reading:** Peter H. Salus and Paul Beekman Taylor, "Eikinskjalði, Fjalar, and Eggthér," *Neophilologus* 53 (1969): 76–81.

## FJÖLNIR

Odin name; son of Frey in the Learned Prehistory (a medieval historical theory holding that Scandinavians had emigrated from Troy).

In *Grímnismál* Odin announces a long series of his names (stanzas 46–50) that constitute the beginning of his epiphany before Geirröd. Fjölfnir appears among them in stanza 47. In *Reginismál* a man standing on a mountain, clearly Odin, uses the name to refer to himself; the stanza is quoted in *Völsunga saga*. In Snorri's *Gylfaginning* Fjölfnir is among the 12 names given for Alfödr and is listed again when Snorri quotes from *Grímnismál*. It is also common in skaldic poetry.

The other Fjölfnir, or tradition about Fjölfnir, is captured most fully in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*. There Fjölfnir is the son of Frey, king and deity of the Swedes in Uppsala. During Fjölfnir's reign the Peace of Fródi, which had started during Frey's reign, continues, "at Lejre," that is, in Denmark, according to Snorri. Fjölfnir visits Fródi, and a huge vat of beer is brewed up in the basement with the floors open above it. That night, sleepy and dead drunk, Fjölfnir wanders out from his bedchamber to relieve himself and falls into the vat, where he perishes. The first stanza from Thjóðólf's *Ynglinga tal* was probably Snorri's source, and he cites it here, but it just says that Fjölfnir died visiting Fródi.

The etymology of the name is disputed. When Odin bears it, something like "all-knowing" seems appropriate, but many other possibilities have been advanced for the prehistoric Swedish king.

*See also* Frey

**FJÖLVAR**

Being, perhaps a giant, with whom Odin spent some time, according the *Hárbardsljód*, stanza 17:

I was with Fjölvar all of five winters,  
In that island, which is called Algrœn [All-green];  
We could fight and fell carrion,  
To test much, to try our luck with a maiden.

Since a female Fjölvr is listed among the thulur for giantesses, it seems likely that Fjölvar would be her male counterpart, and therefore also a giant. In *Hárbardsljód*, stanza 18, Odin says that he alone slept with seven sisters on Algrœn. The incident is otherwise unknown, but it would appear to fit the pattern of Odinic seductions in Giantland, known, for example, from the story of his seduction of Gunnlöd. Algrœn is also found only in this passage.

*See also* Gunnlöd; *Hárbardsljód*; Odin

**FJÖRGYN**

An alternative name for Jörd (Earth) when feminine; the father of Frigg when masculine (a distinction lost in the system used in this book for medieval Icelandic names). Fjörgyn as Jörd is found in *Völuspá*, stanza 56, in the kenning “Fjörgyn’s son” for Thor, and even more clearly in *Hárbardsljód*, stanza 56. Odin as Hárbard has finally refused to ferry Thor over the sound. The stanza ends this way:

So keep to the left on the road, until you find Verland;  
There Fjörgyn will find Thor, her son,  
And she will teach him the ways of kinsmen to Odin’s lands.

A few skalds used Fjörgyn (or a noun *fjörgyn*) for “earth” or “land” in their verse.

Fjörgyn (masc.) as the father of Frigg is known from Snorri’s *Edda*, where it is found in both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*. *Lokasenna*, stanza 26, appears to give the same information. Loki is responding to Frigg:

Shut up, Frigg! You are Fjörgyn’s daughter  
and have ever been most eager for men,  
when Vé and Vili you allowed, wife of Vidrir,  
To embrace you.

There is a small measure of ambiguity here, since the word I have rendered “daughter” is used in the kenning “Ód’s maiden” for Freyja, who is the wife of

Ód. But if we accept Snorri, who says in both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* that Frigg is Fjörgyn's daughter, we must assume that the information about Fjörgyn is purely genealogical and has nothing to do with the charge of sexual insatiability that follows.

*See also* Jörd

**References and further reading:** Those who can read Dutch may wish to read Jan de Vries, "Studien over germaansche mythologie, I: Fjorgyn en Fjorgynn," *Tijdschrift voor nederlandsche taal- en letterkunde* 50 (1931): 1–25, which finds that the masculine form of the name is late and that the name originally meant something like "life" or "vital power."

### FÓLKVANG (PEOPLE-FIELD OR ARMY-FIELD)

Freyja's abode.

Odin's vision of the dwelling places of the gods in *Grímnismál* includes Fólkvang, in stanza 14:

Fólkvang is the ninth, and there Freyja rules  
The choice of seats in the hall.  
Half the dead she chooses each day,  
And Odin has half.

According to Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, the hall itself at Fólkvang is called Sessrúmnir (Seat-roomy), but this information is not found elsewhere.

If we understand *Fólk-* as "army," Fólkvang begins to look like some kind of alternative to Valhöll, where the einherjar dwell until Ragnarök. Freyja too has an association with warriors who, like the einherjar, fight each day and feast each night, in that she presides over the Hjadningavíg (an eternal combat of warriors). In that case, however, the end comes not with Ragnarök but with the intervention of a Christian.

*See also* Freyja; Hjadningavíg

### FORNJÓT

Progenitor of the elements, according to Norwegian tradition.

This tradition is located in *Fundinn Noregr* (Norway Found), as the beginning of *Orkneyinga saga* (The Saga of the Orkney Islanders) is sometimes called, and in a section of *Flateyjarbók* called *Hversu Noregr byggðisk* (How Norway Was Settled). According to them Fornjót was a king who ruled Gotland or Jutland, "which is called Finnland [i.e., the land of the Sámi or Lapps] and Kvenland [the Finnish-settled part of northern Norway]." Some editors alter "Gotland" or "Jutland" to "that land." Fornjót had three sons: Hlér ("whom we call Ægir," according to

*Fundinn Noregr*), Logi, and Kári. *Ægir* and *hlér* are nouns meaning “sea.” The noun *logi* means “fire,” and *kári* is listed among the *thulur* for “wind.” Kári, according to *Fundinn Noregr*, was the father of Frosti (Frost), the father of Snær (Snow) the Old. From there the genealogy goes into some of the month names of the old Scandinavian system. *Hversu Noregr byggðisk* has a somewhat more elaborate genealogy: Kári’s son is Jökull (Glacier); his son, Snær (Snow); his children, Thorri (the name of the fourth month of winter), Fönn (Heap-of-snow), Drífa (Snowdrift), and Mjöll (Fresh-powdery-snow). The last three nouns are feminine, and we are presumably to understand these children as daughters, but Thorri is a masculine noun, and Thorri is a king. He had three children, sons Nór and Gór and a daughter Góí. She vanished, and when Thorri held the sacrifice a month later than usual, they named the month after her (Góí followed Thorri in the old Scandinavian calendar).

Fornjót is found only twice in older poetry. In *Ynglinga tal*, stanza 29, Thjóðólf of Hvin seems to use the kenning “son of Fornjót” to mean fire, and a poet known only as Svein apparently uses the kenning “ugly sons of Fornjót” for wind (Snorri quotes the line in *Skáldskaparmál* as an example of this kenning). Fornjót is included among the *thulur* for giants.

The meaning of the name is unclear. It can be analyzed as Forn-jótr (Ancient-Jutlander, or possibly Giant), or For-njótr (Early-user or Early-destroyer), Forn-njótr (One-who-enjoys-sacrifices), or even perhaps Forn-þjótr (Ancient-screamer).

*See also* *Ægir*

**References and further reading:** Margaret Clunies Ross, “Snorri Sturluson’s Use of the Norse Origin Legend of the Sons of Fornjót in his *Edda*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983): 47–66, analyzes Snorri’s understanding of natural forces as giants.

## FORSETI (CHAIRMAN)

Baldr and Nanna’s son.

In poetry Forseti is found only in *Grímnismál*, stanza 15, in Odin’s vision enumerating the abodes of the gods.

Glitnir is the tenth. It is studded with gold  
And thatched with silver as well.  
And there Forseti dwells most of the day  
And settles all lawsuits.

Snorri includes Forseti in the catalog of *æsir* in *Gylfaginning*:

Forseti is the son of Baldr and Nanna Nepsdóttir. He has that hall in heaven, which is called Glitnir, and all who come to him in legal difficulties go away reconciled. That is the best place of judgment of gods and men.



Except for his presence at Ægir's banquet in the beginning of *Skáldskap-armál* and in the list of Baldr kennings (in "Forseti's father"), Forseti is otherwise unknown in the mythology. Since the nineteenth century some scholars have wished to associate him with Fosite, a god after whom a Frisian island is supposed to be named, according to Alcuin's *Life of St. Willebrord* from the end of the ninth century. The original Germanic form would be closer to the Frisian and would have been converted by the Scandinavians into the common noun *forseti* (which is still in use today as the title of the president of Iceland).

*See also* Baldr; Glitnir

**References and further reading:** The implications of the hypothetical connection between Fosite and Forseti (doubted by Theodor Siebs, "Der Gott Fos[e]te und sein Land," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 35 [1909]: 535–553) are investigated by Stephen Schwartz, *Poetry and Law in Germanic Myth*, University of California Publications, Folklore Studies, 27 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

### **FREKI (RAVENOUS-ONE)**

One of Odin's wolves.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 19, part of Odin's vision of the abodes of the gods, mentions Freki:

Geri and Freki the one accustomed to battle feeds,  
Glorious Herjafödr [Odin];  
And on wine alone the weapon-noble  
Odin ever lives.

Snorri quotes this stanza in *Gylfaginning* and puts the two halves together, saying that Odin gives his own food to the wolves, as he lives on wine alone.

The name is simply the definite form of an adjective, and it is more than a little ironic that the same adjective is used in *Völuspá* in a repeated stanza (44, 49, 58) about Ragnarök:

Garm howls much before Gnipahellir.  
Fetters will burst, and the ravenous one [*freki*] run free.

Thus Odin feeds one ravenous one at his side in Valhöll and another—with his body—at Ragnarök.

*See also* Geri; Odin

**FREY**

Important god, member of the vanir.

Frey is the son of Njörd, either by his sister when he lived among the vanir or by Skadi. When Snorri says in *Gylfaginning* that Njörd had two children, apparently by Skadi, he first introduces Frey and Freyja, saying that they were both good-looking and powerful:

Frey is the most noble of the æsir. He rules over rain and sunshine and with that the growth of the earth, and it is good to call on him for prosperity and peace. He also rules over the wealth of men.

This is practically a textbook description of a fertility god. In the warlike culture of the æsir, there is little for him to do, and the mythology only grants him three moments: his entry into the æsir, his marriage, and his death.

Frey joined the æsir as a result of the Æsir-Vanir War, according to Snorri in *Ynglinga saga*. When a settlement was reached, the two groups “exchanged hostages [here understood as men exchanged as pledges of good faith]. The vanir sent their most distinguished men, Njörd and Frey, and the æsir in exchange sent Hœnir, whom they declared to be a great leader, and Mímir, who was very wise.” Although Hœnir could make no decision without Mímir, whom the vanir finally decapitated, Njörd and Frey were a success, and the æsir made them into leaders of cult.

Frey’s courtship of Gerd is the one full narrative about him in the mythology, although in fact he acts rather passively in it. The story is the subject of the eddic poem *Skírnismál* and is paraphrased in much shorter form by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*. To follow the story in *Skírnismál*: Frey had seated himself in Hlidskjálf, Odin’s high seat, with its view into all the worlds. Looking into Jötunheimar, he saw a beautiful maiden and immediately fell lovesick. Skírnir, Frey’s servant, is asked to look into the matter. Frey explains that the gleaming arms of a maiden at Gymir’s farmstead have captivated him:



*Small figure from Rällinge, Sweden, possibly Frey, and if so probably used as an amulet. (Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)*

7. The maiden is more dear to me than to any young  
Man, in days of yore;  
No one wishes, of the æsir and elves,  
That the two of us come together.

Given Frey's horse and sword, Skírnir sets out to woo the girl on his master's behalf. At Gymir's homestead he is challenged first by a shepherd, then by the girl herself, Gerd. Invited in (though she fears, Gerd says, that he may be the slayer of her brother), Skírnir begins his blandishments. Gerd refuses first golden apples and then the ring Draupnir, saying she has no need of gold. Skírnir now turns to threats: He will kill her and her father; he will tame her through magic. He turns to curses: She will be a laughingstock, forced to live among the giants, with a three-headed giant or with no man at all. The æsir are angry at her. She is forbidden joy of men, will live with a giant beneath the Corpse-gate (Nágrind, one of the gates to Hel's realm), be offered goat urine. Finally Skírnir goes into some kind of runic threat, and Gerd capitulates. The wedding will be in nine nights, at a place called Barri. Skírnir returns home and tells the news to Frey, who does not rejoice; he laments:

42. A night is long, longer are two,  
How will I endure three?  
Oft to me a month seemed shorter  
Than this half honeymoon.

For most of the twentieth century Magnus Olsen's nature mythological interpretation of this myth held sway: Skírnir is the sun's ray, sent down from heaven to retrieve Gerd ("earth") from the underworld; the tryst will be at Barri ("in the seed"). Most serious scholars of Norse mythology today would point out that the etymologies required to support this reading are questionable and would not have been at all apparent to a medieval audience. The myth can instead be read as part of the ongoing struggle between the æsir and jötnar, in which the æsir nearly always succeed in obtaining valuables, often women, from the world of the giants. The flow of such wealth is nearly always in one direction only. Furthermore, as Margaret Clunies Ross showed, this and the Njörd-Skadi myth serve to place the vanir hierarchically below the rest of the æsir: The æsir can take wives from among the *ásynjur*, but the vanir must turn to the giants, where the other gods find concubines but not wives.

At Ragnarök Frey will fight Surt (*Völuspá*, stanza 53). In *Gylfaginning* Snorri carries Frey's giving of his sword to Skírnir over to this scene, where, he says, Frey will be swordless and will therefore perish. This is not, according to Snorri, the first time Frey has fought without a sword; at the end of his presentation of



*Large grave mounds at Gamla Uppsala, Sweden. According to Snorri's Ynglinga saga, the historical Frey was buried in such a mound. (Courtesy of Roger Buton)*

the Gerd myth, Snorri says that Frey fought the giant Beli without his sword and killed him with the antler of a hart.

According to *Grímnismál*, stanza 5, the gods gave Álfheim to Frey as a gift in days of yore when he cut his first tooth, and this was therefore presumably Frey's dwelling place. Snorri, on the other hand, assigns Álfheim to the so-called light-elves. Frey has two precious objects, the ship *Skíðbladnir* (although Snorri

in *Ynglinga saga* assigns this ship to Odin) and the boar Gullinborsti (Gold-bristle) or Slídrugtanni. Both these objects were made by the dwarfs Ívaldi and Brokk, according to Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (*Grímnismál*, stanza 43, mentions only the ship). In his account of Baldr's funeral, Úlf Uggason says that Frey arrived riding a boar with golden bristles, and Snorri understood this to be Gullinborsti and added that it was pulling the cart in which Frey rode.

*Lokasenna* assigns two servants to Frey, Byggvir and Beyla, whom scholars interpret through etymology as associated with barley and either cows, beans, or bees; all of these can be made to fit with the notion of a fertility god. Loki's insult to Frey in the poem is a reminder of the sword given up for Gerd and the problem that its loss will pose at Ragnarök.

In Snorri's version of the Learned Prehistory in chapter 10 of *Ynglinga saga*, Frey is one of the important early kings of Sweden. He succeeds his father Njörd, who succeeded Odin. He was popular and prosperous like his father. Frey erected a large temple at Uppsala and established his principal residence there, gave it all that was owed him, lands, and money. Then began the wealth of Uppsala, and it has lasted ever since.

In his days the Peace of Fródi began. At that time there was also prosperity throughout all lands. The Swedes attributed that to Frey. The more wealthy the people became through peace and prosperity, the more he was worshipped than the other gods.

The passage goes on to say that Frey married Gerd the daughter of Gymir, that their son was Fjölnir (in the *Eddas* this is an Odin name), that Frey's other name was Yngvi, and that for this reason his descendants are called the Ynglingar.

Snorri next tells a curious story about Frey's death. After Frey dies, his men place the corpse in a mound but do not reveal his death. Freyja takes over the sacrifices, and Frey's men maintain the body for three years. When the Swedes finally learn of Frey's death, they believe that their peace and prosperity is dependent on his body being present in Sweden and do not wish to have him cremated. They declare him to be the *veraldar* god ("world god") and forever after sacrifice to him for peace and prosperity.

This story bears a close similarity to that of the concealed death of King Frotho (Fródi) III in Book 5 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, which also lasts for three years. And Fródi is also famously associated with peace and prosperity. Clearly the two figures played out the same mythic pattern, and many scholars think they may once have been the same figure.

According to Book 1 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, the prehistoric Danish king Hadingus carried out a sacrifice to Frey and established an annual sacrifice to Frø (Frey), which the Swedes call Frøblot.

The tale *Ögmundar tháttur dytts* gives information on what a high medieval Icelandic audience thought about the worship of Frey in Uppsala. Ögmund, an Ice-lander, has fled the court of Olaf Tryggvason in Norway because he is falsely sus-pected of the murder of one of the king's men. Coming to Sweden, he meets and befriends a priestess of Frey. The god is a statue, inhabited by a demon and pulled about on a cart. Ögmund wrestles away the demon through the divine interven-tion of King Olaf and thereafter impersonates Frey. The Swedes are delighted that their god deigns to eat and drink with them and are impressed when his priestess becomes pregnant. Unlike before, Frey is now willing to be propitiated with gold and fine clothing. Times are good until King Olaf arrives to bring Ögmund back to Norway. Ögmund marries Frey's priestess and both are baptized.

Place-names showing worship of Frey are especially popular in eastern Swe-den. Writing around the year 1070, Adam of Bremen, in his history of the arch-bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, described the pagan temple at Uppsala. In it were statues of three gods, one of them, Fricco, who clearly reflects Frey, equipped with an enormous phallus. A small figurine found in Rällinge, Sweden, has a similar feature and has been interpreted as Frey and associated with a statement in *Vatnsdæla saga* to the effect that a worshiper of Frey carried a figurine of the god. Other Sagas of Icelanders mention people who were priests (*goðar*) of Frey. The most famous of them, Hrafnkel, the title character of *Hrafnkels saga*, owned a horse he kept sacred to Frey. The extent to which these materials represent worship of Frey is not clear, but Frey was certainly known as an important deity.

**See also** Æsir-Vanir War; Álfheim; Aurboda; Beyla; Byggvir; Fjölfnir; Freyja; Fródi; Hadingus; Ingunar-Frey; *Ögmundar tháttur dytts*; Slídrugtanni; Yngvi

**References and further reading:** Magnus Olsen's reading of the myth behind *Skír-nismál* is in "Fra gammelnorsk myte og kultus," *Maal og minne*, 1909: 17–36. Margaret Clunies Ross's reading of the mythology, including the hierarchical role of vanir-giant marriages, is in *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Icelandic Society*, vol. 1: *The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994). The first serious objection to Olsen's seasonal hypothesis was by Jöran Sahlgren, *Eddica et Scaldica: Fornvästnordiska studier 1–2*, Nordisk filologi, undersökningar och handlingar, 1 (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1927–1928), who on pages 209–303 argued that there are parallels with folk tale and saga. More recently, Lars Lönnroth interpreted the myth sociologi-cally in "Skírnismál och den fornisländska äktenskapsnormen," in *Opuscula Septentrionalia: Festskrift til Ole Widding, 10.10.1977*, ed. Bent Chr. Jacobsen et al. (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1977), 154–178; Lotte Motz attempted a reading more in the heroic realm, in "Gerðr: A New Interpretation of the Lay of Skírnir," *Maal og minne*, 1981: 121–136; and Stephen A. Mitchell tried a structural analysis in "For Skírnis as Mythological Model: Frið at kaupá," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983): 109–122. The implications of a presumed sacral marriage, however, animate the literary analysis of Ursula Dronke, "Art

and Tradition in *Skírnismál*," in *English and Medieval Studies, Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), 250–268, and the comparative analysis of Annelise Talbot, "The Withdrawal of the Fertility God," *Folklore* 93 (1982): 31–46. The detailed analysis of Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: En analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal, og Hyndluljóð* (N.p.: Solum, 1991), the most recent serious study of the myth as a whole, again departs from the notion of a sacred marriage, but Steinsland associates it both with fertility and with kingship. On Skírnir's curse, see Joseph Harris, "Cursing with the Thistle: *Skírnismál* 31, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 26–33. On Frey and animals, see Helge Rosén, "Freykult och djurkult," *Fornvännen* 8 (1913): 213–244.

### FREYJA (LADY)

Important goddess; only named female of the vanir; object of giants' lust.

Freyja is the daughter of Njörd, either by his sister when he lived among the vanir or by Skadi. When Snorri says in *Gylfaginning* that Njörd had two children, apparently by Skadi, he first introduces Frey and Freyja, saying that they were both good-looking and powerful.

And Freyja is the most excellent of the goddesses. She has that homestead in heaven which is called Fólkvang, and wherever she rides to battle she has half the dead, and Odin half. . . . Her hall is Sessrúmnir; it is great and handsome. And when she travels, she drives her cats and sits in a carriage. She is the most accessible for people to call on, and from her name it is a sign of respect that women of substance are called *frúvur* [ladies]. She enjoys erotic poetry. It is good to call on her for love.

In the first half of this passage, Snorri was paraphrasing *Grímnismál*, stanza 14, which he had just quoted. Then, a few pages later, seemingly contradicting his statement that Freyja was the most excellent of the *ásynjur*, Snorri listed her only sixth in the catalog of *ásynjur*, although he did say that she is equal in nobility to Frigg.

She is married to Ód, and their daughter is Hnoss. . . . Ód went away on long journeys, and Freyja weeps for him, and her tears are red gold. Freyja has many names, and the reason for that is that she called herself by various names when she went about among unknown peoples looking for Ód. She is called Mardöll and Hörn, Gefn, Sýr. Freyja owned the Brísinga men.

Ód's journeys are not mentioned in the older poetry, although "Ód's bed-friend" is a Freyja kenning in skaldic poetry, and Freyja's journeys in search of

him are completely undocumented. Her ownership of the Brísinga men is alluded to in *Thrymskvida* and perhaps explained in *Sörla tháttr*. *Thrymskvida* also mentions a feather coat that Freyja lends to Loki, giving him the gift of flight. Loki borrows the same item from Freyja in the story of his retrieval of Idun from Thjazi in *Skáldskaparmál*.

In the extant mythology Freyja exists primarily as an object of lust for male giants. Thrym will only return Thor's stolen hammer if he gets Freyja in return; the giant who is to build the wall around Ásgard demands Freyja, the sun, and the moon as his wages; and Hrungnir boasts drunkenly in Ásgard that he will kill all the æsir except Freyja and Sif, whom he will carry off. Freyja's reputation, meanwhile, is somewhat questionable. When asked to go off as Thrym's bride so that Thor can get his hammer back, she protests that everyone will know her to be most eager for men if she does so. In *Lokasenna* Loki tells her that she has been lover of all the assembled æsir and elves; she even was caught in flagrante delicto with her brother, and then, Loki says, "you had to fart"—an insult or joke whose exact tenor escapes us today. Of course, Loki accuses all the goddesses of sexual indiscretion, but *Sörla tháttr* says flat out that Freyja plies the oldest profession, for she gives herself to four dwarfs in order to obtain a beautiful necklace, perhaps the Brísinga men. In *Hyndluljóð* Hyndla accuses Freyja of being the lover of Óttar, the human whose genealogy the poem explores.

This sexual history, and her fondness for erotic poetry, make plausible Snorri's assertion that it is to Freyja whom one must turn in affairs of the heart. Presumably this attachment to human love accords with the notion of the vanir as fertility deities. We might reasonably expect a fertility deity to be associated with the dead, but in this mythology, at least, the evidence all goes in the other direction. Odin, the god of wisdom and magic, has the closest association with the dead, and the other vanir, Njörd and Frey, have no such connection. Indeed, the word Snorri used for the dead whom Freyja shares equally with Odin refers to those who die in battle. This association with the battle-dead may also underlie Freyja's connection with the eternal battle of the Hjadningavíg, which has obvious parallels to the endless battles of the einherjar.

Freyja is also connected with magic, especially the kind of shamanic magic called *seid*. In *Ynglinga saga* Snorri says that Freyja first taught *seid* among the æsir, and many scholars surmise that Freyja is identical with the figure Gullveig in *Völuspá*, whom the æsir cannot kill and who apparently under the name Heid performs *seid*. *Seid*, like the dead, is something that Freyja and Odin share. It may thus be pertinent to recall here Odin's sexual promiscuity and his many names. Finally, the names Ód (Óðr) and Odin (Óðinn) look like a doublet, parallel to Ull and Ullin, and Saxo has a story in Book 1 of *Gesta Danorum* about a long absence of Odin from his realm, which some scholars think is parallel to Ód's absences.



We know that Freyja was a potent force in the last years of paganism, in Iceland at least, because of a famous incident recounted in connection with the conversion. Hjalti Skeggjason, one of the supporters of the conversion, was outlawed for blasphemy at the althingi because of a little ditty he recited calling Freyja a bitch (i.e., a female dog; it has been suggested that he wished to suggest that she was a whore). She also appeared frequently as a base word in woman kennings of the early skalds, and many place-names indicate a worship of her.

**See also** Æsir-Vanir War; Frey; Gullveig; Njörd; Odin; Seid; Vanir

**References and further reading:** Treatments of Hjalti Skeggjason's blasphemous verse include Felix Genzmer, "Der Spottvers des Hjalti Skeggjason," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 44 (1928): 311–314, and Klaus von See, "Der Spottvers des Hjalti Skeggjason," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 97 (1968): 155–158 (reprinted in von See, *Edda, saga, Skaldendichtung* [Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1981], 380–383). Jan de Vries, "Studien over germaansche mythologie, VII: De skaldenkenningen met de namen der godinnen Freyja en Frigg," *Tijdschrift voor nederlandsche taal- en letterkunde* 53 (1934): 210–217, is a comprehensive study of the kennings for Freyja and Frigg.

## FRIGG

Goddess, wife of Odin and mother of Baldr.

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri cites Frigg as foremost among the goddesses, as would be appropriate for the consort of Odin. Indeed, in the mythology as we have it she mostly functions as wife and mother. She warns Odin not to contest in wisdom with Vafthrúdnir, the wisest giant, but wishes him well when he perseveres (*Vafthrúdnismál*, stanzas 1–4), and sorrows upon his death at Ragnarök (*Völuspá*, stanza 53). In the prose header to *Grímnismál* she quarrels with Odin over the fate of their protégés. In Snorri's version of the Baldr story she first extracts an oath from all things not to harm Baldr, and when that fails, as the result of her own interaction with the disguised Loki, she dispatches Hermód to Hel to try to retrieve him. According to *Völuspá*, stanza 33, she weeps at Fensalir after Baldr's death, and Snorri says that Fensalir is her dwelling. And in the Second Merseburg Charm, from the tenth century or earlier, Frija, the Old High German equivalent to Frigg, participates in the curing of Baldere's (Baldr's) horse; Odin is also present.

However, there is tantalizing information of a far different nature. According to Snorri in *Ynglinga saga*, once when Odin had been away on a journey for a particularly long time, Odin's brothers, Vili and Vé, divided his inheritance and both possessed Frigg, but Odin later returned and took her back. Saxo Grammaticus tells a somewhat similar story in Book 1 of the *Gesta Danorum*. In order to adorn herself with gold, Frigga despoils a statue of Othinus and then gives her-

self to a servant in order to enlist his aid in taking down the statue. In shame, Othinus goes into self-imposed exile, and during his exile a sorcerer called Mithothyn takes his place and institutes a change in cult procedures. Upon Othinus's return Mithothyn flees to Fyn and is killed by the inhabitants there.

Loki knew a version of this story and was not above reminding Frigg about it. In *Lokasenna*, stanza 26, when Frigg tries to silence Loki, he rebukes her.

Shut up, Frigg! You are Fjörgyn's daughter  
and have ever been most eager for men,  
when Vé and Vili you allowed, wife of Vidrir [Odin],  
to embrace you.

Frigg does not dispute the charge, but in response she says that if she had a son like Baldr on the scene, Loki would not get out alive. This gives Loki a chance to claim responsibility for the death of Baldr (stanzas 27–28). At this point Freyja intervenes, warning Loki that Frigg knows the fates of all people, although she chooses not to disclose them (stanza 29, also quoted by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*).

It is not easy to make sense of this material. To be called “Fjörgyn's daughter” (Snorri has the same information, but the name is otherwise unattested) is hardly an insult. Fjörgyn, in the feminine form of the name (a distinction lost in the system used in this book for medieval Icelandic names), is Thor's mother. The taking of Odin's inheritance by Vili and Vé in Odin's absence in *Ynglinga saga* might indicate the absence of a legitimate heir, so this incident might have occurred early in Odin's career. Frigga's infidelity with the slave is hardly of the same order. The discord suggested by the prose header to *Grímnismál* finds a parallel in an incident in Paul the Deacon's *History of the Langobards*, written in the second half of the eighth century. Here Godan (Odin) and Frea (Frigg) dispute over an upcoming battle between the Vandals, whom Godan favors, and the people who will become the Langobards, whom Frea favors.

The name Frigg is derived from an Indo-European root meaning “love,” and in the *Interpretatio Germanica*, it was Frigg who was given the day of Venus, that is, Friday. This may accord with the Scandinavian stories of Frigg's infidelity. Her silent gift of prophecy, however, remains unexplained. It would belong more properly to Freyja, with her association with *seid*. The name Frigg is frequently found in Scandinavian place-names indicating cult activity. Based on the Swedish place-name evidence, Hugo Jungner argued that Frigg and Freyja were once identical. Although that cannot be proved, there certainly are similarities, not least in Freyja's marriage to Óðr, who also is frequently away on journeys. *Oddrúnargrátr*, stanza 9, has a formula: “May the gracious beings help you, / Frigg and Freyja / and more gods.”

*See also* Interpretatio Germanica; Merseburg Charms; Seid

**References and further reading:** Hugo Jungner's study is *Gudinnan Frigg och Als härad: En studie i Västergötlands religions-, språk- och bebyggelsehistoria* (Uppsala: Wretman, 1922). Jan de Vries, "Studien over germaansche mythologie, VII: De skaldenkenningen met de namen der godinnen Freyja en Frigg," *Tijdschrift voor nederlandsche taal- en letterkunde* 53 (1934): 210–217, is a comprehensive study of the kennings for Freyja and Frigg.

## FRÓDI

Ancient Danish king and figure of heroic legend.

In his account of the story told to explain the kenning "Fródi's flour" for gold in *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri says that Skjöld was a son of Odin and the founder of the Skjöldung dynasty in Denmark. His son was Fridleif, and Fridleif's son was Fródi. Fródi ascended to the throne at the time Emperor Augustus had imposed peace on the entire world when Christ was born.

But because Fródi was the most powerful of all kings in the northern lands, the peace was ascribed to him wherever Scandinavian was spoken, and the people of the north call it the Peace of Fródi. No man harmed another, even if he encountered the killer of his father or brother, free or bound. At that time there was no thief or robber, so that a certain gold ring lay for a long time on Jelling heath.

Snorri probably got the precise details of the Peace of Fródi from stanza 6 of the poem *Grottasöng* (which he cited right after telling about Fródi's demise through the actions of two slave girls he had purchased to turn an enormous mill).

Here no one should harm another,  
Live for evil or work for death,  
Nor strike with a sharp sword,  
Even if the killer of his brother he find bound.

In the poem this peace appears to relate to Fródi's seat at Hleiðra (modern Lejre in Denmark), whereas in Snorri's version the peace is temporal and euhemerized with the birth of Christ. Scholars believe that Snorri took both of these notions from *Skjöldunga saga*, an account of the early Danish kings that is now known only through a seventeenth-century Latin paraphrase. But Snorri knew (or told of) another version of the Peace of Fródi, which he recounted in chapter 10 of his *Ynglinga saga*. According to this account, the Peace of Fródi was associated with Frey, here euhemerized as a king of Sweden who had succeeded Njörd, who had succeeded Odin himself. But Snorri slips out of his euhemerization somewhat:

In his days the Peace of Fródi began. At that time there was also prosperity in all lands. The Swedes attributed that to Frey. The more wealthy the people became through peace and prosperity, the more he was worshipped than the other gods.

Interestingly, Snorri introduces Fródi in the next chapter, calling him "Peace-Fródi" and putting him in Lejre at the same time that Frey's son Fjölfnir is in Uppsala. Perhaps Snorri moved the Peace from Fródi to Frey, or perhaps, as some scholars have come to believe, Frey and Fródi were in effect two versions of the same figure, a local fertility god. That assumption finds strength in the references to Frey in stanzas 1 and 2 of *Skírnismál* as "the fródi," that is, "the wise one" or "the fruitful one."

In *Vellekla*, a poem from the end of the tenth century praising Hákon the Hladir jarl, the poet Einar Helgason skálaglamm said that no ruler had brought about such peace and prosperity except Fródi.

Saxo names several kings called Frotho, the Latin equivalent of the Norse Fródi. Of these the most relevant is Frotho III, who is the subject of the pivotal fifth book of *Gesta Danorum*. This Fródi, the son of Fridleif, is a successful Danish king renowned for lawgiving. Having defeated his enemies, he institutes an era of peace in his land, ridding it of theft, and to test this peace he hangs a heavy golden arm ring at a crossroads. Fearful of his authority, no thief dares take it, and he derives great fame from this act. Saxo tells us that this period coincides with Christ's stay on earth, and it is ended when a wicked woman urges her son to steal the arm ring, and then, trying to hide from Fródi's wrath in the form of a sea cow, she gores and kills him. To forestall the possibility of rebellion or invasion, the Danes conceal Fródi's death, embalm the body, and carry it about in a cart for three years before finally burying it. This story bears close similarity to Snorri's account of the death of Frey in *Ynglinga saga*, since Frey's death also is concealed for three years, during which time peace and prosperity continue. *Ögmundar tháttur dytts* tells of the worship of an idol of Frey transported in a cart near Uppsala, and, more distantly, Tacitus reports this of the goddess Nerthus.

Fródi would therefore appear to be a historicized remnant of one or more aspects of the myth and cult of the vanir, associated with peace and prosperity.

*See also* Frey; Njörd; *Ögmundar tháttur dytts*

**References and further reading:** The cults of Frey, Fródi, and Nerthus are scrutinized and associated with Baldr by Gustav Neckel in the fourth chapter of his influential book on Baldr, *Die Überlieferungen vom Gotte Balder* (Dortmund: F. W. Ruhfus, 1920). The *Festschrift für Otto Höfler zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Helmut Birkhan and Otto Gschwantler (Vienna: Notring, 1968), contains two articles on Fródi: Albert Ebenbauer, "Fróði und seine Fried," treats the Peace

of Fródi, and Kurt Schier, "Freys und Fróðis Bestattung," (389–409), shows the essential unity of Fródi's and Frey's funerals. In "Appolon eminthéus and the Teutonic Mysing," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 33 (1936): 40–56, Alexander Haggerty Krappe argued an implausible connection between Fródi's killer Mýsing in the Norse tradition and the Greek *eminthéus* (mouse-god), perhaps the plague.

### **FULLA**

Minor goddess.

Snorri lists Fulla fifth in his catalog in *Gylfaginning* of goddesses among the æsir and says, "She is still a virgin and goes about with her hair down and a gold band about her head; she carries Frigg's trunk and looks after her shoes and shares secret counsels with her." The prose preceding *Grímnismál* in the *Poetic Edda* says that Frigg sent her "trunk-maiden" Fulla to Geirröd to trick him into mistreating the disguised Odin, and in *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri says that "ruler of Fulla" is a kenning for Frigg. Nanna sent a finger ring back to Fulla from the world of the dead in Snorri's recounting of the Baldr story, and Fulla is numbered with other important goddesses among the guests at Ægir's party, according to the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*.

Fulla is presumably identical to the Volla of the Second Merseburg Charm. The etymology of the name appears to have to do with fullness, perhaps therefore fertility.

*See also* Merseburg Charms

### **GALAR (YELLER)**

*See* **Mead of Poetry**

### **GALDRAR**

Magic charms.

What we think we know about galdrar we get from the sagas. In the mythology, these are especially associated with Odin. In *Baldrs draumar*, stanza 3, Odin is called the father of galdrar, and *Hávamál*, from about stanza 135 onward, describes his mastery of magic songs. Although these are called songs rather than charms, they clearly are galdrar. Euhemerizing in chapter 7 of his *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri wrote of Odin's magic arts,

All these skills he taught with runes and those songs that are called galdrar. Because of this the æsir were called smiths of galdrar. Odin knew that art called seid, and he carried it out himself.

The noun appears to be a simple past participle of the verb *gala*, “crow, yell.” Although some commentators distinguish *galdrar* from *ljóð* as spoken rather than sung, it is difficult to find any primary source material that enforces the distinction.

Interestingly, one of the meters of eddic poetry is called *galdrar* meter. It is an extended form of *ljóðahátt*, “song or chant meter.”

*See also* Seid

## GAME OF THE GODS

Motif associated with the golden age of the gods and with the survival of the race of gods after Ragnarök.

The key passages are in *Völuspá*, which gives a synopsis of the entire mythology. In stanza 8 the gods have just completed their creation and ordering of the cosmos and their building of cult sites and tools:

8. They played a game in the home field, were merry  
For them there was no lack of gold.

At this point their “golden age” is disrupted by the arrival of three powerful giant maidens from Jötunheimar. The rest of the poem details the struggles and conflicts of the world of the gods, until finally they and the cosmos are destroyed at Ragnarök. But after Ragnarök the earth comes up a second time, and *æsir* will meet and inhabit it. They have memories of the old mythology (stanza 60), but they also have concrete objects from the earlier times.

61. There they will find wondrous  
Golden gaming pieces in the grass,  
Those which in ancient times they had had before.

Unsown fields will grow, and Baldr will return—surely this is some kind of new golden age, or perhaps a return to that time when the world was not solely defined as a place of conflict.

The gaming pieces, then, are clearly symbolic, and what kind of game might have been played with them is anybody’s guess. There was an elaborate “hunting game” (so-called because one player, with a greater number of pieces, attacks the other, who starts with a smaller number of pieces) called *hnefatafl*, but we cannot be certain this is what the *Völuspá* poet had in mind. Certainly gaming pieces were items of high status, as the Lewis chess set and other finds indicate. It may also be noteworthy that the very late *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* places a golden gaming set in a supposed temple of Thor.

A. G. van Hamel advanced an elaborate and not very convincing hypothesis to the effect that the game ruled the world independently of the will of the gods and that its end caused Ragnarök. Perhaps more intriguing is the answer to one of the riddles in the riddle sequence in *Hervarar saga*. The riddles are put by Gestumblindi, who is actually Odin in disguise, and are solved by King Heidrek up to the very last one, which repeats the question at the epiphany in *Vafthrúdnismál*: What did Odin say into the ear of Baldr before he was put on the funeral pyre? Three of the riddles involve *hnefatafl*, and the first of them is as follows:

Who are those thanes who ride to the assembly  
All reconciled together; their peoples  
They send over lands to build settlements.  
King Heidrek, ponder the riddle.

The answer varies according to the manuscripts: either Ítrek's board game or Ítrek and Andad, sitting at their board game. If, as some have suggested, Ítrek is an Odin name, the first reading might suggest the game of the gods. But since Andud, a possible variant of Andad, is a giant name, according to the thulur, the second reading would situate the game in the ongoing struggle between gods and giants.

**References and further reading:** A. G. van Hamel's "The Game of the Gods" appeared in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 50 (1934): 218–242. On *hnefatafl*, see Appendix D of *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, translated and with introduction, notes, and appendices by Christopher Tolkien (London: T. Nelson, 1960).

## **GARM**

Dog, "best of hounds" according to *Grímnismál*, stanza 44.

The stanza is recited by Odin as he hangs in the fire at the home of King Geirröd toward the end of the poem and just before he begins the recitation of his names that culminates in an epiphany. Stanza 44 has a list of things that are best in the mythological world: Yggdrasil of trees, Skíðbladnir of ships, Odin of æsir, Sleipnir of horses, Bilröst of bridges, Bragi of skalds, Hábrók of hawks, and, finally, Garm of hounds. In this company we would expect Garm to be a positive figure, but in his only other appearance in poetry, repeated three times more or less verbatim in *Völuspá* (stanzas 44, 49, and 58), he is anything but:

Garm howls loudly before Gniphellir  
The bond will burst, and the wolf run free.

Here Garm appears to be identical with Fenrir, the bound wolf who will get free at Ragnarök. Writing about Ragnarök in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri, who knew and had already quoted in another context the stanza from *Grímnismál*, calls Garm “the greatest monster” and says that after getting from the place before Gnipahellir where he is bound, he will fight with Týr and they will kill each other.

The name (or noun?) is used as a base word in kennings, always with the connotation of one who destroys (e.g., fire is the “Garm of wood”). Thus, Snorri’s beast Mánagarm (Moon-dog) must be the destroyer of the moon, and that is precisely what Snorri says he is in *Gylfaginning*.

*See also* Bound Monster; Mánagarm

## GEFJON

Minor goddess and/or female figure of legendary prehistory.

Snorri lists Gefjon fourth in his catalog in *Gylfaginning* of goddesses among the æsir and says she is a virgin, served by those women who died unmarried. Snorri also numbers her among the goddesses at Ægir’s party at the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál* and again when he is discussing gold kennings. She also makes an appearance in *Lokasenna*, where she follows Idun in trying to discourage the verbal dueling. Loki says to her: “Shut up, Gefjon! / That one will I now mention, / who seduced you: / the white lad, / who gave you a piece of jewelry, / and you lay your thigh over him.”

The most intriguing Gefjon story is recorded as part of the *Ragnarsdrápa* of Bragi Boddason the Old, taken to be the earliest known skald. Bragi is describing scenes decorating a shield, and one difficult stanza says that Gefjon, using four oxen, plowed land that she then took from Gylfi and added to Denmark. This verse is found in some manuscripts of Snorri’s *Edda* and in his *Heimskringla*. In the manuscripts of Snorri’s *Edda* that have the verse, it accompanies the following story, which opens *Gylfaginning*: Gylfi, the prehistoric Swedish king whose “delusions” at the hands of the æsir will make up the subject of this section of the *Edda*, had once given “to a traveling woman as payment for his pleasure” (that is, as payment to a prostitute) the land she could plow up in a day and a night using four oxen. That woman was Gefjon, of the family of the æsir. “She took four oxen from the north out of Jötunheimar, and those were the sons of a giant and her,” and with their supernatural power they plowed up an entire piece of land and took it west to a sound, where they put it down. Gefjon named it Selund (modern Sjælland, the main island of Denmark, on which the city of Copenhagen is now located). And a body of water was left behind in Sweden, Gylfi’s realm, called Lögrinn (the lake, i.e., Lake Mälaren, west of Stockholm), and the bays in Lögrinn match the headlands on Seland.



When Snorri told this story and quoted the verse in *Ynglinga saga*, he says that Odin had just settled at Óðinsey (Odin's island, modern Odense in Denmark; the name is more likely to derive from "Odin's holy place," but that would not have suited Snorri's purpose in *Ynglinga saga*). From there, Odin sent Gefjon north to look for land, and she came to Gylfi, who gave her plow land; no motivation for the gift is provided. She went to Jötunheimar, got four sons by a certain giant, changed them into oxen, and plowed up and transported the land that was to be Seland, thereby creating Lögrinn, whose fjords match the headlands of Seland. She settled in Seland, and Odin married her to his son Skjöld.

These varying conceptions and stories are not easy to reconcile. We are faced with a prostitute who is said to be a virgin goddess, and a goddess—virgin or not—who is said to have had children with a giant, which should disqualify her as a goddess because the sexual traffic is all in the opposite direction. In other words, we have both physical and mythological impossibilities. Some of the inconsistencies recede if we understand Gefjon as a figure of prehistory, a member of the æsir not in their roles as gods but in their role as "Asia-men," as the Icelandic Learned Prehistory understood them, and as Snorri presented them in the Prologue to his *Edda*, the frame to *Gylfaginning*, and *Ynglinga saga*. This Gefjon had a clear association with Denmark, especially Sjælland, even if no other texts support a marriage with Skjöld, the founder of the Danish royal family known as the Skjöldungar in medieval Scandinavian tradition and the Scyldingas in Old English. Her interaction with the giants would have been on the order of other such human-supernatural interactions. However, many scholars have found themselves persuaded that Gefjon originally was a goddess. They believe that her name has to do etymologically with gifts or giving and that she was therefore a fertility deity, perhaps localized to Denmark. It is also possible that her name was the source of a Finnish word meaning "bride's outfit, trousseau." Finally, in some translations of the lives of the saints into medieval Icelandic, the translator substituted the name of Gefjon for a pagan Roman god or used it in a list of pagan Scandinavian gods where there was a list of pagan Roman gods in the original text. Sometimes Diana is the Roman goddess in question, and that has led to the idea that Gefjon's split between virgin and whore may have originated in an analogy with Diana.

The lack of the Gefjon/Gylfi story in one branch of the manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, and the fact that Gylfi is reintroduced directly after it in the other manuscripts, suggests that it was not part of Snorri's original text but may have been added by a later scribe. If this passage is not from Snorri's pen, it is possible that whoever wrote it either knew about the Gefjon-Diana equivalence or took the view of the pagan gods as demons and therefore made a whore out of Gefjon. However, *Lokasenna* suggests that the notion of Gefjon's sexual activity was

more widespread. Since having children with a giant is ordinarily inconceivable for a goddess, as I have noted, perhaps in the end we must simply accept that there were shifting, sometimes contradictory conceptions of Gefjon.

**References and further reading:** Two recent articles in English treat Gefjon: John Lindow, "The Two Skaldic Stanzas in *Gylfaginning*: Notes on Sources and Text History," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 92 (1977): 106–124, and Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Myth of Gefjon and Gylfi," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 93 (1978): 149–165.

## GEFN

Name for Freyja.

Snorri says in *Gylfaginning* that Freyja has many names because she took on different names among the various peoples she encountered when she went to search for her missing husband, Ód. Gefn is listed as a Freyja name in *Skáldskaparmál* and the thulur and turns up in kennings in skaldic poetry, but there is no extant narrative in which Freyja bears the name. The meaning of the name has to do with the verb "to give" and would therefore accord with the notion of Freyja as a fertility deity.

*See also* Freyja

## GEIRRÖD

Giant visited by Thor, who killed the giant's daughters.

The myth is known from the poem *Thórsdrápa*, by the skald Eilíf Godrúnarson, about whom we only know that he was associated with the court of Hákon Sigurdarson, jarl of Hladir toward the end of the tenth century and portrayed in the sources as an enthusiastic pagan. *Thórsdrápa* is an extremely difficult poem, but we have an account of the myth in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*, preceding the citation of the poem itself. It begins with Loki flying to Geirrödargardar, the abode of the giant, in Frigg's falcon coat. Captured by Geirröd and starved in a locked chest for three months, Loki agrees to bring Thor there without his hammer or belt of strength. Accompanied by Loki (Thjálfi in *Thórsdrápa*), Thor comes first to the home of the giantess Gríd, the mother of Vídar the silent. She warns him about Geirröd and equips him with a belt of strength, an iron glove, and a staff called Grídarvöl (Gríd's-staff). Thor sets out and arrives at Vimur, greatest of all rivers. Wearing the belt of strength and bracing himself against the current with the staff, Thor fights through deep waters. Then he sees that Gjálp, the daughter of Geirröd, is standing astride the river and causing it to swell with urine or menstrual fluids. Saying, "A river must be dammed at its source," he throws a rock and hits the target. At that moment he comes ashore and grabs a

rowan, which is why, Snorri says, the rowan is called “Thor’s protection.” At Geirrodargardar he sits on a seat and finds that Geirrod’s daughters Gjálp and Greip are pushing up from beneath, obviously trying to crush him against the ceiling. He presses Grídarvöl against the ceiling and forces the chair down on the girls, breaking their backs. Then Geirrod challenges him to a game in the hall. Geirrod throws a piece of red-hot iron at Thor, who catches it in the iron glove. Geirrod jumps behind a pillar, but Thor throws the piece of iron through the pillar, Geirrod, and the wall behind and into the earth.

Saxo Grammaticus tells in Book 8 of his *Gesta Danorum* of the visit of Thorkillus to the vile hall of the dead Geruthus, where he and his companions see the pierced body of an old man and three dead women with their backs broken. Thorkillus tells them that Thor had driven a hot ingot through Geruthus and killed his daughters with thunderbolts.

The myth shows several characteristics of Thor stories—the dangerous journey to the otherworld, the special enmity of female giantesses, and the killing of a male giant—and it also introduces notions of smithing that sometimes seem to lurk behind Thor.

An entirely unrelated figure also bears the name Geirrod, in the eddic poem *Grímnismál*.

**References and further reading:** Eugen Mogk, “Die Überlieferungen von Thors Kampf mit dem Riesen Geirröð” in *Festschrift tillägnad Hugo Pipping på hans sextioårsdag den 5 november 1924*, Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 175 (Helsinki: Mercator, 1924), 379–388, discusses the sources: *Thorsdrápa*, *Snorra Edda*, Saxo, and a transposed version in the late-Icelandic *Thorsteins saga bæjarmagns*. In “An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr’s Encounter with Geirröðr and His Daughters,” in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, and Hans-Bekker Nielsen ([Odense:] Odense University Press, 1981), 370–391, Margaret Clunies Ross offered an essentially psychological reading, in which Thor had to free himself from “the female objects of his primary bonding and the destructive rivalry with his father” (p. 390).

## **GERD**

Giantess wife of Frey.

Gerd is the daughter of the giants Gymir (Geyser according to one source) and Aurboda. Frey caught sight of her from Odin’s seat, Hlidskjálf, fell in love with her, and dispatched his servant Skírnir to woo her. Gerd yielded not to Skírnir’s blandishments but to his threatened curses, and a wedding was arranged for nine nights later. Frey complained that this wait would be too long. However, Frey and Gerd

do appear to be married in the mythological present. Frey gave up his sword to obtain Gerd, and without it he will be weaponless when he faces Surt at Ragnarök.

Gerd's name has been associated etymologically with the earth and with enclosures, and the wedding is often taken to be the divine coupling of sky and earth, or at least of fertility god and representative of the soil. It can also be read as a simple case of the gods getting what they want from the giants.

*See also* Frey; Hrímgrímnir

#### GERI (RAVENOUS-ONE)

One of Odin's wolves.

*Grímnismál*, stanza 19, part of Odin's vision of the abodes of the gods, mentions Geri:

Geri and Freki the one accustomed to battle feeds,  
Glorious Herjafödr [Odin];  
And on wine alone the weapon-noble  
Odin ever lives.



*Stamped gold foil from Helgö, Sweden, showing a couple embracing. (Statens Historiska Museet, Stockholm)*

Snorri quotes this stanza in *Gylfaginning* and puts the two halves together, saying that Odin gives his own food to the wolves, as he lives on wine alone.

The name is simply the definite form of an adjective.

*See also* Freki, Odin

#### GESTUMBLINDI (ONE-BLIND-TO-GUESTS?)

A name taken by Odin when he participates in a riddling contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heidreks konungs*.

A man called Gestumblindi has been summoned by his enemy, King Heidrek. Seeking help, he sacrifices to Odin. That night a stranger arrives at the door, says

his name is Gestumblindi, and changes places with the original Gestumblindi. This second Gestumblindi, clearly Odin in disguise, goes to Heidrek and elects to propound riddles rather than to be judged by Heidrek's wise men. "That is right and proper," says the king. Gestumblindi puts 30 riddles, and Heidrek easily guesses the answer to the first 29. The answers refer mostly to household situations and natural phenomena, but one is "the women of Ægir," and the twenty-ninth is "Odin riding Sleipnir." The thirtieth is the unanswerable question that doomed Vafthrúdnir: What did Odin say into the ear of Baldr before he was put on the funeral pyre? Heidrek now recognizes Odin and slashes at him with a sword, but Odin flies off in the form of a hawk. He curses Heidrek, prophesying that the worst slaves will kill the king, and this quickly comes to pass.

Despite the mostly mundane content of the riddles themselves, the story fits the type of the contest of wisdom, several of which involve Odin in the mythology. *Vafthrúdnismál* is the closest analogue, not just for the final question but also because the giant has wagered his head on the contest. In *Grímnismál* Geirröd, the human king who fastened Odin in the fire and has been listening to his ecstatic wisdom performance, falls onto his sword at the end of the story and is thus killed. Both human kings suffer ignominious deaths.

**References and further reading:** Jan de Vries, "Om Eddaens visdomsdigtning," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 50 (1934): 1–19, treats the Gestumblindi story in association with eddic wisdom poetry. An analysis of the story itself is that of Elias Wessén, "Gestumblinde," in *Festskrift tillägnad Hugo Pipping på hans sextoårsdag den 5 november 1924*, Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 175 (Helsinki: Mercator, 1924), 537–548.

## GIMLÉ

Hall where people live after Ragnarök.

The main source is *Völuspá*, stanza 65, where the seeress, describing the situation after Ragnarök, has this to say:

She sees a hall standing, fairer than the sun,  
Thatched with gold, at Gimlé;  
There shall trustworthy people dwell  
And throughout all ages enjoy bliss.

Snorri Sturluson quotes the stanza in the *Gylfaginning* of his *Edda*, where he mentions Gimlé three times. It appears that he thought of it, or perhaps more accurately, wished the æsir to present it to Gylfi/Gangliar, as a kind of pagan heaven.

**GINNUNGA GAP**

The primeval void that existed before the creation of the cosmos.

The major source is *Völuspá*, stanza 3:

It was early of ages, when Ymir dwelled,  
There was not sand nor sea nor cool waves;  
Earth did not exist nor heaven above,  
Ginnunga gap existed, but no grass at all.

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri does not explain what Ginnunga gap was, but he uses it in his creation story:

Those rivers which are called the Élivágar, when they had come so far from their source that the fermentation that accompanied them there, hardened like the slag that runs out of fires, as it was freezing, and when the ice stopped and froze solid, then it was covered over with frost, and that drizzling rain which arose from the poison, froze into frost, and the frost grew over all Ginnunga gap. . . . That part of Ginnunga gap, which faced the north, was filled with a load and heaviness of ice, and in from there drizzle and a gust of wind; and the southern part of Ginnunga gap turned toward those sparks and embers, which flew out of Muspellsheim. . . . Just as cold and all bad things came from Niflheim, all that which came from Muspell was hot and bright, but Ginnunga gap was as calm as a windless sky, and when the warm breeze met the frost, it melted and dripped. And from those drops of poison life emerged, with the power that the heat sent, and it grew into a human form, and that one is called Ymir, but the frost giants call him Aurgelmir, and all the families of frost giants descend from him.

Later Snorri makes it clear that he understood Ginnunga gap as the center of the universe, for it is there that the sons of Bor place the body parts of Ymir to make the cosmos, and one of the roots of Yggdrasil runs where Ginnunga gap used to be.

Formally, Ginnunga gap must be parsed as “Gap of ginnungs.” What ginnungs are is not wholly clear, but the first syllable *ginn-* in mythological contexts was used to intensify what followed, as in *ginn-holy*, “extremely holy,” gods, or *ginnregin*, “great powers,” that is, the gods. At the same time, as a noun (in poetry) *ginn* meant “falsehood, deception,” and there was a common verb *ginna*, “deceive.” A gap of ginnungs, then, was probably a proto-space filled with magic powers.

**References and further reading:** The meaning I propose in the last sentence is taken from Jan de Vries, “Ginnungagap,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 5 (1930): 41–66, reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Klaas Heeroma and Andries Kylstra (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1965), 113–132.

**GÍSL**

Horse name found in *Grímnismál*, stanza 30, which lists the horses the æsir ride each day when they go to make judgments at Yggdrasil.

Snorri Sturluson includes Gísl in his list of the horses of the æsir in *Gylfaginning* but does not assign the horse to any specific god. Gísl is also listed in the *thulur* for horses. The name looks like the common noun for hostage, but etymologically it can be connected with the word for “beam” or “ray,” which would make more sense for a horse, especially one with a particularly shiny coat.

**GJALLARBRÚ**

Bridge that must be crossed on the way to Hel.

Our knowledge of the Gjallarbrú is derived almost exclusively from Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning*, in the section of the Baldr myth describing the journey of Hermód to Hel in an attempt to retrieve Baldr. After riding nine dark nights, Hermód comes to the bridge, and there he has a conversation with Móðgud, the maiden who guards the bridge. That this bridge leads to the world of the dead is made clear by their dialogue. She asks Hermód his name and family and informs him that although five troops of dead men rode over the bridge yesterday, it resounds no less under Hermód alone. When she asks Hermód his mission, he tells her and asks whether Baldr has come that way. He has, she replies, and she tells him that the way to Hel lies down and north. Snorri adds the puzzling detail that the bridge is all “roofed with bright gold.”

Gjallarbrú means “bridge of [i.e., over] Gjöll,” but we have little information about this river. Earlier in *Gylfaginning*, when he cataloged the rivers flowing from Hvergelmir, Snorri said that Gjöll is “closest to the gate of Hel,” but this he may have got from his conception of Baldr’s journey. The wolf Fenrir is bound by means of a flat rock called Gjöll, but there is no compelling reason to associate the stone and the river.

The Gjallarbrú is found only once outside of Snorri in medieval Iceland, namely in a verse by his nephew, Sturla Thórdarson, who once used the expression “travel the Gjallarbrú” for “die.” But it also turns up several times in *Draumkvæde*, a Norwegian ballad telling of the otherworld journey of one Olav Åsteson, who fell asleep Christmas Eve and awoke on Epiphany having had a vision of the fate of dead souls, including, among other things, a passage over the forbidding bridge Gjallarbrú. *Draumkvæde* is known from numerous oral recordings made in Telemark in the 1840s, but the vision it describes probably derives from the high Middle Ages. Thus, the Gjallarbrú appears to be one of the few pagan motifs to flourish in a Christian environment, obviously because a cruel bridge to the other world figures frequently in medieval vision literature. How-

ever, Snorri's medieval audience could hardly have conceived of the Gjallarbrú outside of the well-known visionary tradition. Perhaps Snorri covered the bridge with gold to differentiate it somewhat from the bridges of medieval Christian vision literature.

*See also* Baldr; Gjallarhorn

**References and further reading:** For an English translation of *Draumkvæde*, with discussion, see Knut Liestøl, *Draumkvæde: A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages*, *Studia Norvegia*, 3 (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1946). More recent discussion is in Dag Strömbäck, "Resan till den andra världen: Kring medeltidsvisionerna och Draumkvæde," *Saga och sed*, 1976: 15–29, and Peter Dinzelberger, "Zur Entstehung von Draumkvæde," *Skandinavistik* 10 (1980): 89–96.

### GJALLARHORN (SCREAMING-HORN)

Heimdall's horn, sounded at the onset of Ragnarök.

The relevant source is *Völuspá*, stanza 46:

Mím's sons sport, and the world tree trembles  
At the old Gjallarhorn.  
Loudly blows Heimdall, the horn is aloft,  
Odin is speaking to Mím's head.

In *Gylfaginning* Snorri paraphrases this verse and adds the information that Heimdall blows the Gjallarhorn in order to awaken all the gods for a meeting to deal with the oncoming forces of chaos.

Snorri had mentioned the Gjallarhorn twice previously in *Gylfaginning*. In describing Heimdall, he has duly ascribed the horn to him, using the word for a long brass instrument that would answer today to an unvalved trumpet. Heimdall's blast on it can be heard throughout the entire world. How odd it is, then, that in the very first reference to the Gjallarhorn, Snorri refers to it as a drinking horn and associates it with Mímir, who acquires wisdom by drinking from it out of the well that is associated with him, the Mímisbrunn. The association, if there is one, may be retrievable from stanzas 27 of *Völuspá*:

She knows that Heimdall's hearing is hidden  
Under the holy tree, accustomed to brightness;  
She sees a river washed with a muddy waterfall  
From the pledge of Valfödr—would you know yet more?

We know from various sources (including the next stanza of *Völuspá*), that Odin pledged his eye in the well. If Heimdall's hearing (ear?) is also pledged



there, as the stanza seems to suggest, he ought to have supernatural hearing, just as Odin has supernatural vision. But what of the horn? Perhaps Snorri was influenced by *Grímnismál*, stanza 13, which says that Heimdall (not Mím) drinks good mead at his hall, Himinbjörg. Or perhaps he simply turned the notion of hearing inside out and imagined it as noise. Or perhaps this Gjallarhorn, like the Gjallarbrú, is associated with the river Gjöll, which flowed from Hvergelmir, like Mím's well, a spring located near the center of the cosmos.

**See also** Gjallarbrú; Heimdall; Mímir

**References and further reading:** Åke Ohlmarks, *Heimdalls Horn und Odins Auge: Studein zur nordischen und vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 1: *Heimdall und das Horn* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1937), has a chapter devoted to the horn, but it follows an outmoded methodology and is highly speculative.

## **GJÁLP**

Giantess, daughter of Geirröd, killed by Thor.

According to Snorri Sturluson writing in *Skáldskaparmál*, Gjálp was the giantess straddling the river Vimur and causing it to swell with urine or menstrual fluids when Thor was trying to cross it on his way to Geirröd. Thor threw a rock at her, saying, "A river must be dammed at its source," and he hit the target. Later he killed Gjálp and her sister Greip by breaking their backs beneath his seat as they tried to push it up against the ceiling to crush him.

Gjálp is also found in stanza 37 of *Hyndluljóð*, in the "Short *Völuspá*," where she is listed as one of the nine giant mothers of an unnamed character, presumably Heimdall. Gjálp also turns up in the thulur and in kennings in skaldic poetry. The meaning of the name may be something like "screamer."

**See also** Geirröd; Greip; Heimdall

**References and further reading:** Lotte Motz, "Giantesses and Their Names," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981): 495–511.

## **GLAD (GLAD)**

Horse name found in *Grímnismál*, stanza 30, a stanza listing the horses the æsir ride each day when they go to make judgments at Yggdrasil.

Snorri Sturluson includes Glad in his list of the horses of the æsir in *Gylfaginning* but does not assign the horse to any specific god. Glad is also listed in the thulur for horses.

## **GLADSHEIM**

One of the abodes of the æsir, described in *Grímnismál*, stanza 8, in the list of such abodes.

Gladshheim is the fifth, where the gold bright  
 Valhöll lies widely situated,  
 And there Hropt [Odin] chooses each day  
 Weapon-dead men.

This would appear to be a larger place in which Valhöll is situated; that is, it seems that Valhöll is a hall, perhaps one of many, at Gladshheim. Snorri knew *Grímnismál*, so it is interesting to note that he says Gladshheim was a temple erected at Idavöll by Alfödr, with 12 high seats: "That is the best and greatest building made on earth; outside and inside it is like a single piece of gold." Although Gladshheim looks as though it should mean "Happy home," Snorri may therefore have understood it to mean "Gleaming home."

*See also* Idavöll; Valhöll

### GLÆR (GLASSY)

Horse name found in *Grímnismál*, stanza 30, a stanza listing the horses the æsir ride each day when they go to make judgments at Yggdrasil.

Snorri Sturluson includes Glær in his list of the horses of the æsir in *Gylfaginning* but does not assign the horse to any specific god. Glær is also listed in the *thulur* for horses.

### GLEIPNIR

The fetter with which the wolf Fenrir was finally bound.

According to Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning*, after Fenrir broke out of two previous fetters, Lœding and Drómi, the æsir feared they would never be able to bind the wolf.

Then Alfödr [Odin] sent Skírnir, Frey's servant, down into the world of the dark-elves to some dwarfs and had that fetter made, which is called Gleipnir. It was made of six things: cat noise, woman beard, mountain roots, bear sinews, fish breath, and bird spittle. . . . The fetter was smooth and soft as a silk ribbon.

The wolf thought little renown could be won from breaking out of such a bond, and he feared a trick, but he allowed himself to be bound with Gleipnir when Týr put his hand in the wolf's mouth. Thus he was bound, and thus Týr lost his hand.

*See also* Fenrir; Týr

**GLEN**

Husband of Sól (Sun), according to Snorri Sturluson.

Writing in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri alludes to *Vafthrúdnismál*, stanza 23, which personifies the sun and moon. But Snorri has a somewhat different and more elaborate story: Mundilfœri is a man who had two children who were so beautiful that he named them Máni and Sól (i.e., Moon and Sun), and he married Sól to a man called Glen. Thereafter the gods punished this act of pride by placing the children in heaven to serve the actual heavenly bodies, which the gods had created. Sól drives the horses that pull the sun, and Máni controls the motion of the moon and its waxings and wanings.

I have paraphrased the text fairly closely. The implication that the act of pride was marrying his daughter to Glen, and not naming one's children Sun and Moon, is right there in Snorri, but like most people I prefer to ignore it and think that the gods punished Mundilfœri for the names and not the marriage. There is certainly no evidence that Sól's marriage to Glen annoyed the gods, for indeed there is no other evidence whatever about this marriage. Glen is discussed in passing in various reference works, and most writers make an effort to find an appropriate etymology for his name, in one root or another having to do with shining or gleaming.

*See also* Máni; Mundilfœri; Sól

**GLITNIR**

The hall of Forseti, Baldr's son.

Glitnir is enumerated among the abodes of the æsir in *Grímnismál*, stanza 15:

Glitnir is the tenth. It is studded with gold  
And thatched with silver as well.  
And there Forseti dwells most of the day  
And settles all lawsuits.

In *Gylfaginning* in his *Edda* Snorri Sturluson repeats this information.

*See also* Forseti

**GNÁ**

Minor goddess.

Snorri lists her fourteenth and last in his catalog in *Gylfaginning* of goddesses among the æsir and says that Frigg sends her into various worlds on errands. She has a horse called Hófvarpnir (Hoof-thrower) that runs over air and sea. Snorri

now cites a strange verse exchange. Seeing her riding in the sky, *vanir* (why it should be *vanir* is unclear) ask in verse what is flying there. She answers, "I am not flying, / although I travel / and move through the sky / on *Hólfvarpnir* / whom *Hamskerpir* sired with *Gardrofa*." The name *Hamskerpir* is not transparent, and *Gardrofa* looks as though it should mean "Fence-breaker," but these horses and any myth connected with them are not known from any other source. Snorri ends his discussion of *Gná* by saying that from her name what goes high up is said to *gnæfa* ("to project").

### GNIPHELLIR (GNIPA-CAVE)

Cave where the hound *Garm* is bound, in *Völuspá*, stanzas 44, 49, and 53, and in the *Gylfaginning* of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*.

The meaning of the entire name is sometimes taken to be "overhanging cave."

### GODS, WORDS FOR

Terms used to designate the gods collectively in medieval Icelandic, especially in the written texts of the mythology. This entry treats the individual terms other than *æsir*, which has its own entry, and attempts to draw a few conclusions based on general trends.

Probably the most commonly found term after *æsir* is *goð* or *guð* (both forms are attested), which is obviously cognate with English "god." Etymologically, the word is usually understood as deriving from something like "one called on." This is the term that is used in translations of saints' lives to render Latin *deus* with the sense of pagan idol, and the sense of an idol is often found in the native Icelandic literature as well. But in the mythological texts, the word appears to be essentially interchangeable with *æsir*; that is, it is a plural and refers to the gods as a group, usually including both *æsir* and *vanir*. It was used in the singular only of the sun (the "shining god," *Grímnismál*, stanzas 38–39, *Sigrdrífumál*, stanza 15). There are Odin kennings such as *hanga-goð* (god of the hanged) and *hjaldr-goð* (noise [i.e., of battle]-god), but such kennings could also be used of giants: *stál-goð* (steel-god, apparently *Hrungnir*), *öndur-goð* (snowshoe-god, i.e., *Skadi*), used of her before her marriage to *Njörd* and entry into the community of the gods. According to the principles of kenning formation, there is considerable freedom in the use of such base words. What is far more striking is that *goð* was also used in the singular to refer to the Christian god, but with masculine grammatical gender, not the original neuter grammatical gender of all other uses of the word.

Another term is *regin*, like *goð* grammatically a neuter plural noun. It is perhaps most familiar in the genitive plural form *ragna*, in *Ragnarök* (literally,

“fates of the gods”), the term for the end of the reign of the gods and the demise of the cosmos. Etymologically, *regin* appears to be derived from a root meaning “to give counsel.” A runic inscription from around 600 C.E. has the word in a compound that scholars read as “descended from the divine powers.” If this interpretation is correct, then this word has quite a prehistory. Compounds like *reginkunnr*, “descended from the gods,” are relatively clear in eddic poetry, but in other cases the usage of the word as a prefix meaning “great” or “tremendous,” which is common in modern Icelandic (e.g., *reginvitleysa*, “great stupidity”), may be at work. Thus, does *regindómr* in *Völuspá*, stanza 65, mean “tribunal of the gods, divine rule,” or something similar, or does it mean “great judgment”? The *regin-þing* in *Helgakvida Hundingsbana I* appears simply to be a great assembly, as there is no sign of the gods at this point in the poem.

An interesting aside to the above discussion, in which a “god” word is used as an intensifier, is that “giant” words often fulfill this function, as in English (e.g., “giant mistake”) or Swedish (*jättekul*, “way cool”).

The language of eddic poetry suggests that these terms are very nearly synonymous:

Then all the *regin* went to the judgment seats,  
The very holy *goð*, and considered that . . . (*Völuspá*, stanzas 6, 9, 23, and 25)

Hail *æsir*,  
hail *ásynjur* [goddesses],  
hail all the very holy *goð*. (*Lokasenna*, stanza 11)

Finally, there are two words that are transparently plurals meaning bonds (*bönd*) or fetters (*höpt*), both again neuter. Both are limited to poetry, especially skaldic poetry. Indo-European comparative mythology suggests that binding gods were common. For the Germanic area, Tacitus states in *Germania*, chapter 39, that the Semnones, the “oldest and noblest of the Suebi,” conduct sacrifices in a grove that no one enters unless bound by a chain. Anyone who falls must somehow wiggle out of the grove without help. Some scholars think that the mysterious Fjöturlund, “Fetter-grove,” of *Helgakvida Hundingsbana II* may be related. The practice of the bravest warriors of another tribe, the Chatti, described by Tacitus in chapter 31 of *Germania*, may also be relevant: Novice warriors were not permitted to shave or groom themselves until they had first slain an enemy; the bravest wore an iron ring in token of chains, to be removed by the slaughter of an enemy.

In general, the presence of these various words for the collective of the gods may serve to remind us that the vivid pictures of individual deities with various

personalities given by the mythological texts may not tell the whole story. The collective of gods must also at some time have been a potent force.

*See also* Æsir; Regnator Omnium Deus

**References and further reading:** Walter Gehr, *Der germanische Schicksalsglaube* (Berlin: Junker & Dünhaupt, 1939), associates *regin*, *bönd*, and *höpt* with conceptions of fate. On *regin*, see Albert Morey Sturtevant, "A Study of the Old Norse Word *regin*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 15 (1916): 251–266.

### GREIP (GRIP)

Giantess, daughter of Geirröd, killed by Thor.

According to Snorri Sturluson writing in *Skáldskaparmál*, Greip was one of the two daughters of Geirröd whom Thor killed by breaking their backs beneath his seat as they tried to push it up against the ceiling to crush him.

Greip is also found in stanza 37 of *Hyndluljóð*, in the "Short *Völuspá*," where she is listed as one of the nine giant mothers of an unnamed character, presumably Heimdall. Greip is not found in the *thulur*, but she is used once in a kenning in skaldic poetry.

*See also* Geirröd; Gjálp; Heimdall

**References and further reading:** Lotte Motz, "Giantesses and Their Names," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15 (1981): 495–511.

### GRÍÐ

Giantess who equips Thor on his journey to Geirröd, according to the *Skáldskaparmál* of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*.

Thor came to stay with that giantess who is called Gríð. She is the mother of Vídar the silent. She told Thor about Geirröd, said he was an exceedingly wise giant and difficult to deal with. She lent him her belt of strength, her iron glove, and her staff, which is called Gríðarvöl (Gríð's-staff).

As the mother of Vídar the silent, Gríð is a consort of Odin, and this may explain her willingness to help Thor. In the arrangement of this narrative, she plays a role very like that of an old woman in a fairy tale who equips a hero with information and things he needs. Folklorists call such a figure a donor and note that it is a commonplace of folk narrative.

*See also* Geirröd; Vídar

**GRÍMNISMÁL**

Eddic poem.

*Grímnismál* (Words of Grímnir) is found in both of the main manuscripts of eddic poetry and is quoted extensively by Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning*. In *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* it is located between *Vafthrúdnismál* and *Skírnismál* and was therefore probably regarded by the compiler as the last of the Odin poems, perhaps because here Odin contends with a human king. It consists of 54 stanzas, mostly in *ljóðahátt*; other stanzas are in *galdralag*, and some editors set some stanzas as *fornyrðislag*. The poem is preceded by a prose header under the rubric “About the Sons of King Hraudung” and is followed by a prose colophon.

The prose frame tells of two sons of King Hraudung, a name that turns up as the father of Hjördís in *Sigrdrífumál*, stanza 26, and in the thulur as a sea king. Agnar and Geirröd set out fishing but are blown out to a distant island where a couple takes them in. The old woman fosters Agnar and the old man Geirröd. In spring they return home, but Geirröd, following the old man’s whispered advice, pushes his older brother back out to sea. We learn that the old couple were Frigg and Odin, and when Odin boasts that his foster son is a king while Frigg’s is getting children on a giantess in a cave, Frigg counters that Geirröd is stingy with food—a false accusation—and the couple make a bet. Frigg sends Fulla to Geirröd to warn him of the impending visit of a man with magic powers, and when Odin arrives, calling himself Grímnir (Masked-one), Geirröd puts Grímnir in the fire. Geirröd’s son Agnar offers him a drink, and as the flames lick higher the Masked One speaks. The first three stanzas relate to the frame story: He has been eight nights in the fire and is grateful for the sustenance from Agnar, who will become a king. With stanza 4 he begins a series of visions of the dwellings of the gods, Thor at Thrúdheim, Ull at Ýdalir, Frey at Álfheim, and so forth. Stanzas 9 and 10 describe Valhöll, with its spear shafts, shields, and byrnies within and a wolf and eagle outside. Eleven residences are described, but in place of a twelfth, stanza 17 says that Vídar’s land grows with brush and high grass. Stanzas 18–26 tell about life in Valhöll, including the food of the einherjar, the many doors, and Heidrún and Eikthyrnir. Stanzas 27–30 catalog rivers and other bodies of water, and 31–35 describe Yggdrasil. Stanza 36 lists valkyries. Stanzas 37–39 are about the heavenly bodies. Stanzas 40–41 tell of the creation of the cosmos from the body of Ymir. Stanza 42 calls down the protection of Ull and may therefore be related to the frame. Stanzas 43–44 list the best of things.

In stanza 45 Grímnir says, in *galdralag*, that he has revealed his face to æsir and elves. In stanza 46 he begins to list his names, and these lead to an epiphany.

Sword-weakened carrion  
 Ygg [Odin] will have now;  
 I know that your life has run its course;  
 the *dísir* are angry—  
 now you can see Odin,  
 approach me if you can. (stanza 53)

“Odin I am named now,” he says to begin the last stanza, the final catalog of his names.

According to the prose colophon, Geirröd arises to free Odin from the fire but trips and falls on his sword. Odin disappears at that point, and Agnar enjoys a long reign in his father’s place.

Outside of the frame, the core of the verses represent a catalog of mythological knowledge. This knowledge is largely cosmological and is the sort of thing that is used in such eddic contests of wisdom as *Vafthrúdnismál* and *Alvíssmál*. And although Geirröd does not exchange verses with Odin, he does die at the end of the episode, thus sharing the fate of Vafthrúdnir and Alvið. In short, there is an implicit contest of wisdom here despite Geirröd’s silence. Thus, just as Odin has triumphed over the giant Vafthrúdnir, so he triumphs over a human king.

There are, however, additional aspects that are of interest. Odin’s performance is set off not only by his consumption of a drink, as is normal in contests of wisdom, but also by his being hung in the fire. Here one thinks first of his self-sacrifice, as told in *Hávamál*. Pain and deprivation lead to the performance or acquisition of wisdom. Without necessarily imagining *Grímnismál* to represent a shamanic event, we may readily imagine that Odin’s verses, especially the cosmological ones, report a vision.

Much of the recent discussion of the poem has centered around the relationship of the prose to the verse and the frame to the catalog of mythological knowledge. Whether the prose is late, or whether the frame and cosmological catalogs were once separate entities, is not easy to discern. The poem is impossible to date, but it is not difficult to imagine something like it being performed during the pagan period.

**References and further reading:** Bo Ralph, “The Composition of the *Grímnismál*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 87 (1972): 97–118.

### GROTTASÖNG

Eddic poem, spoken by two giant women who turn a magic mill and foretell the demise of King Fródi of Denmark.

The poem is found only in manuscripts of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, in the section called *Skáldskaparmál*. Snorri cites it after explaining the kenning “Fródi’s



flour" for gold. Skjöld, he says, was a son of Odin and the founder of the Skjöldung dynasty in Denmark. His son was Fridleif, and Fridleif's son was Fródi. Fródi ascended to the throne at the time Emperor Augustus had imposed peace on the entire world when Christ was born, and this was called the Peace of Fródi in Scandinavia. Fródi visited the Swedish king Fjölnir and purchased from him two slave girls, Fenja and Menja, who were large and strong. At that time there was a magic mill in Denmark, named Grotti, which no one had been strong enough to operate. Fródi set the slaves to turning it and bade them grind out gold, which they did, and also peace and prosperity for Fródi. But he did not allow them rest, and finally they ground out an army against Fródi, led by the sea king Mýsing. Mýsing killed Fródi and took much booty, and so ended the peace of Fródi. Mýsing took the mill and the slaves and bade them grind salt. He too allowed them no rest. A little later the ship sank, presumably through the grinding of the slave girls, and that is why the sea is salty.

Although Fródi is descended from Odin, the story belongs to heroic legend. The poem itself, which Snorri goes on to cite, is also a part of heroic legend, but it approaches the mythology more closely because of the explicit association of the slaves with the race of giants. In the very first stanza, the slaves are called "prescient." They grind away, contentedly at first, and they indeed grind gold, prosperity, and even the Peace of Fródi (stanza 6). But Fródi will not let them rest, and their good will evaporates. Stanzas 8 and 9 reveal that Fródi's problem has a mythological side.

8. You did not, Fródi, wisely guard your interests,  
Eloquent friend of men, when you purchased slaves;  
You chose on the basis of strength and appearance  
But about family you did not enquire.
9. Hard was Hrungr and his father,  
Yet was Thjazi more powerful than they;  
Idi and Aurnir, our kinsmen,  
Brothers of mountain giants, to them we were born.

As girls they played beneath the earth, casting boulders about (stanza 11), causing the earth to shake (12). Then they fought battles, deposed princes, helped a hero, reddened blades (13–15). Now they are slaves of Fródi and are not pleased with their lot. Grinding ever more fiercely, they see fire approach the stronghold (19) and warn Fródi that he will not keep the throne of Hleiðra (20). They grind on, seeing the fates of men (21). The son of Yrsa and Hálfdan will avenge Fródi (22). Their fearsome grinding grows, and in a giant rage, they destroy the mill. The last stanza gives one of them the last word:

Still the mountain giant's bride spoke words:

We have ground, Fródi, as we dared;

The women have completed the grinding.

The poem gives us the sense that the giants threaten humans as well as gods, but that whereas the gods can mostly keep the giants in check, humans cannot. The giants have great powers, but attempting to harness those powers can be dangerous and destructive. Odin and the gods may be able to acquire precious objects from the giants, but humans had better be very careful about such matters.

*See also* Fródi

**References and further reading:** Folklore descendants and analogues are presented in Alfred W. Johnson, "*Grotta Söngr* and the Orkney and Shetland Quern," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 6 (1908–1909): 296–304, and Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "The Song of Grotte," *Modern Language Review* 19 (1924). An intelligent recent reading is that of Joseph Harris, "Reflections on Genre and Intertextuality in Eddic Poetry (with Special Reference to *Grottasöngr*)," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Saga Conference*, ed. Theresa Pàroli (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull' Alto Medioevo, 1990), 231–243.

### GULLINBORSTI (GOLD-BRISTLE)

Frey's boar; the boar Slídrugtanni.

In his account of Baldr's funeral in *Húsdrápa*, composed circa 985 in western Iceland, Úlf Uggason said that Frey arrived at the funeral riding a boar with golden bristles, and this was presumably Gullinborsti (indeed, it is possible that the name derived from this verse). When Snorri Sturluson gave his famous account of the same funeral, he said that Gullinborsti pulled the cart in which Frey was riding. In *Hyndluljóð*, stanza 7, Freyja apparently refers to her friend (lover? protégé?) Óttar as a boar, and the word *gullinbusti* follows, which most editors read as the adjective "gold-bristled" rather than the name of Frey's boar, since in the following line, this boar is named Hildisvíni (Battle-pig). It is therefore possible that both Frey and Freyja had a boar with golden bristles.

According to Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, Gullinborsti was made by the dwarfs Brokk and Eitri, in a wager with Loki, at the same time that other precious objects for the gods were made. Snorri mentions in both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* that Gullinborsti had another name, Slídrugtanni.

Scholars understand the boar as associated with the fertility of the vanir but also with the early Swedish kings.

*See also* Dwarfs; Frey; Freyja; Slídrugtanni

**GULLINTANNI (GILDED-TOOTH)**

Name for Heimdall.

The name is given by Snorri when he describes Heimdall in the catalog of the æsir in *Gylfaginning*, where he adds that Heimdall's teeth were of gold. It is not attested elsewhere, but in stanza 13 of his *Gráfeldardrápa*, a poem memorializing Harald Greycloak, who died circa 974, the poet Glúm Geirason called gold the "teeth of Hallinskídi," using another of Heimdall's names.

*See also* Gulltopp; Heimdall

**GULLTOPP (GOLD-TOP)**

Heimdall's horse.

Gulltopp is listed as one of the horses of the æsir in *Grímnismál*, stanza 30, and as a horse name in the thulur. Only Snorri assigns the horse to Heimdall. He does so in his description of Heimdall in the catalog of æsir in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri says that Gulltopp is one of the horses ridden by the æsir to daily judgments near Yggdrasil, but he does not associate the horse with Heimdall. In his description of Baldr's funeral, however, Snorri fills out his source, Úlf Uggason's *Húsdrápa* (which just says that Heimdall came riding), by stating that Heimdall rode Gulltopp.

The name Gold-top could refer to a horse with a reddish-yellow mane, but given that Heimdall himself is called Gullintanni (Gilded-tooth), we may perhaps be permitted to think of the precious metal.

*See also* Gullintanni; Heimdall

**GULLVEIG**

Mysterious female in *Völuspá*, stanzas 21–22, apparently associated with the war between the æsir and vanir.

21. She remembers the war of peoples first in the world,  
When Gullveig with spears they studded  
And in Hár's hall burned her;  
Thrice burned, thrice born,  
Often, unseldom, though she yet lives.

22. Heid they called her, wherever she came to houses,  
A seeress skilled in prophecy, she observed magic staffs;  
She performed seid, wherever she could, she performed seid in a trance,  
She was ever the joy of an evil woman.

These stanzas are obscure, but it is hardly going too far to say that Gullveig came to the hall of Odin (Hár), was attacked but could not be killed, and under the name Heid went about performing seid. Since *Ynglinga saga* says that Freyja first brought seid to the æsir, it is not impossible that Gullveig is Freyja, and that she brought seid to the æsir in the first instance either as a strategy in the war, or that her bringing of seid started the war. Beyond this, many fanciful attempts have been made to interpret Gullveig, some based on a literal understanding of her name as “gold-drink.”

*See also* Æsir-Vanir War; Freyja; Seid

**References and further reading:** Heino Gehrts, “Die Gullveig-Mythe der *Völuspá*,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 88 (1969): 312–378, seeks a background in cult, which seems very speculative. An analysis based on myth is that of Ursula Dronke, “The War of the Æsir and Vanir in *Völuspá*,” in *Idee Gestalt Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus von See*, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), 223–238; Gullveig might, she thinks, have been some kind of idol burned by the æsir because Freyja, a woman, led the vanir in battle. In her *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Icelandic Society*, vol. 1: *The Myths* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), Margaret Clunies Ross suggests that Gullveig/Freyja was sent by the vanir, perhaps as a possible sexual partner, and rejected by the æsir because they did not take wives from lower social groups, and that their vehement reaction, the attempt to kill her, may have precipitated the war.

## GUNGNIR

Odin’s spear.

Like Sif’s golden hair, Frey’s ship *Skíðbladnir*, Odin’s ring *Draupnir*, Frey’s golden boar, and Thor’s hammer, Gungnir was made by the dwarfs. Although it is not specifically named as Gungnir, Odin throws a spear over an opposing army, was “wounded with a spear and given to Odin, myself to myself,” when he hung on the tree in his self-sacrifice according to *Hávamál*, stanza 138, and had himself marked with a spear when he died, as did Njörd, according to the historicized account of the æsir in the early chapters of *Ynglinga saga*. Skalds call Odin the lord and god of the spear.

*See also* Odin

**References and further reading:** Julius Schwietering, “Wodans Speer,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 60 (1923): 290–292, reprint in Schwietering, *Philologische Schriften*, ed. Friedrich Ohly and Max Wehrli (Munich: W. Fink, 1969), 234–236, advances the clever but almost certainly wrong idea that advances in military technology promoted Odin, god of the spear, ahead of Týr, god of the sword.

**GUNNLÖD**

The giantess seduced by Odin when he obtained the mead of poetry.

The story is told allusively in *Hávamál*, stanzas 108–110, and at length by Snorri Sturluson in the *Skáldskaparmál* of his *Edda*. *Hávamál* 108 says,

I doubt that I would yet have come  
Out of the giants lands,  
If I had not had use of Gunnlöd, the good woman,  
Around whom I put my arm.

Snorri has Odin, in the form of a snake, gain access to Gunnlöd in her father Suttung's mountain abode Hnitbjörg, where Suttung has set her to guard the mead. Odin sleeps with her for three nights, and she permits him three drinks of the mead. With that she leaves the story.

Gunnlöd looks as though it ought to mean "Battle-invitation," which would be a better valkyrie name than giant name.

*See also* Mead of Poetry; Suttung

**GYLLIR**

Horse name found in *Grímnismál*, stanza 30, a stanza listing the horses the æsir ride each day when they go to make judgments at Yggdrasil.

Snorri Sturluson includes Gyllir in his list of the horses of the æsir in *Gylfaginning* but does not assign the horse to any specific god. Gyllir is also found listed in the thulur for giants, perhaps because the name could mean "Yeller" as well as the appropriate horse name, "Golden."

**GYMIR**

Father of Gerd, the giantess who married Frey; possibly also identical with Ægir.

Gymir is indeed identified as the father of Gerd, and Aurboda as his wife and her mother, in *Skírnismál*. In the *Gylfaginning* in his *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson repeats this information, adding that Aurboda was of the lineage of mountain giants. In *Skáldskaparmál*, however, in a discussion of kennings for the sea, Snorri quotes a verse by the skald Ref Gestsson and then says that Ægir and Gymir are one and the same. Ref was an eleventh-century skald quite given to mythological kennings, and the verse in question seems to say that the cold seeress of Gymir often transports the bear of twisted lines into the jaw of Ægir; that is, that the wave (Ægir's daughters are the nine waves) often drives a ship deep into the water. The prose header to *Lokasenna* also says that Ægir was also known as Gymir, and if he was, the in-law relationship with Frey might explain his well-known banqueting with the gods.

*See also* Gerd

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## PRINT AND NONPRINT RESOURCES

**T**his chapter is intended to give the reader a general picture of important background materials, as well as print resources pertaining more generally to the mythology itself. It is arranged according to the following outline:

Background—Viking and Medieval Scandinavia

    Archaeology

    Etymology

The Conversion of Iceland

Medieval Iceland

Women and Gender

Encyclopedias

Primary Sources—Translations

Primary Sources—Commentary and Analysis

    Eddic and Skaldic Poetry

    Snorri Sturluson

Literary Histories

Mythology—General Treatments

Mythology—Important Studies

Nonprint Resources

The focus is on works in English, but materials in German, and in one case, the Scandinavian languages, have occasionally been included when they seemed particularly important or useful. Guidance for more directed readings on individual aspects of the mythology are found in the sections entitled “References and Further Reading” following the entries in chapter 3.

### BACKGROUND—VIKING AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

For the Viking Age a number of excellent works exist offering varying treatments: Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, trans. Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams

(New York and London: Penguin Books, 1992; Danish original 1987), presents a general survey. Roesdahl is an archaeologist, but she is well informed on the written sources as well, and she offers the most accessible and complete treatment currently available. Peter Sawyer, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), contains a collection of chapters by various experts on a number of subjects, based on the latest research. Numerous illustrations enhance the work. R. I. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials, and Myths* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1995) offers a collection of primary source materials with introductions and commentaries. John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1995), is a wonderful collection of maps and includes illustrations in color and apt commentary.

Of the many older works on the Viking Age, none is encountered more frequently than Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, rev. ed. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1984). It is engaging if a bit wordy. Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Achievement of the Vikings: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970), is unsurpassed in the detail of its expert coverage. A groundbreaking work was that of Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd ed. (London: E. Arnold, 1971). David Wilson, *The Vikings and Their Origins: Scandinavia in the First Millennium* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), is for the general reader. Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings* (New York: Penguin, 1965; Danish original 1960), now seems outmoded.

Larger-format illustrated books include James Graham-Campbell and Dafydd Kidd, *The Vikings* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1980), the catalog of an exhibition held at the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Published the same year were two similar books: James Graham-Campbell et al., *The Viking World* (New Haven and New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1980), and David M. Wilson, ed., *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe AD 400–1100* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1980), both perhaps inspired by the exhibition. They all follow in the path of Bertil Almgren et al., eds., *The Viking* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Tre Tryckare, 1967), in including chapters by various experts and rich illustrations, many in color, on large pages. And an explicit exhibition catalog is William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, *Vikings: The Norse Atlantic Saga* (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000). It focuses on the Viking expansion west across the Atlantic and is particularly authoritative on the subjects that are best informed by archaeology. A separate chapter is devoted to religion, art, and runes.

Treatments of individual areas abound. For Britain, see H. R. Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1977), P. H. Sawyer, *From Roman Britain to Norman England* (Methuen, London, 1978), Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles, 850–880*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and Sir Frank Stenton's standard work, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). For mainland Scandinavia: Klavs Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark: The Foundation of a State* (London: Duckworth, 1980). For Russia and expansion to the east: E. A. Melnikova, *The Eastern World of the Vikings: Eight Essays about Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, Gothenburg Old Norse Studies, 1 (Gothenburg, Sweden: Litteraturvetenskapliga Institutionen, Göteborgs Universitet, 1996). For Iceland: Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga saga*, trans. Haraldur Bessason ([Manitoba:] University of Manitoba Press, 1974). For Greenland: Knud J. Krogh, *Viking Greenland: With a Supplement of Saga Texts* ([Copenhagen:] National Museum, 1967).

The Migration Period is well covered in Lucien Musset, *The Germanic Invasions: The Making of Europe, AD 400–600*, trans. Edward and Columba James (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), and Malcolm Todd, *The Early Germans, The Peoples of Europe* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

Medieval Scandinavia has attracted far less general attention than the Viking Age. An exception is Peter Sawyer and Bibi Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800–1500*, Nordic Series, 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Otherwise one should consult the national histories. For Denmark: Stewart P. Oakley, *A Short History of Denmark* (New York: Praeger, 1972). For Iceland: Jón R. Hjalmarsson, *History of Iceland: From the Settlement to the Present Day* (Reykjavík: Iceland Review, 1993). For Norway: T. K. Derry, *A History of Norway* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957). For Sweden: Franklin Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

## Archaeology

This is a field in which things are moving rapidly. As a result, Haakon Shetelig and Hjalmar Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology*, trans. E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), should be read only for background. Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, cited above, will remain the standard for some time to come. The catalogs for the recent Viking exhibitions, especially that of Fitzhugh and Ward, *Vikings: The Norse Atlantic Saga*, also cited above, will give more detail on most topics.



## Etymology

The standard etymological dictionary is Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962). Alexander Jóhannesson's *Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: Francke, [1951–1956]) is also valuable, but access to entries is through Indo-European roots, so it is not for the uninitiated. Those who cannot read German are referred to Gabriel Turville-Petre's *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975)—though it is long out of print—which usually includes information of an etymological nature, as do Rudolf Simek, *Lexikon der altgermanischen Mythologie*, translated as *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge, England, and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1993), and Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1997). Another resource is the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, which contains a glossary of Indo-European roots that is interesting to consult in connection with an etymological discussion involving such roots.

Although there are good introductory works on the study of place-names in the Scandinavian languages, they and nearly all the specialist literature are unavailable in English. Those interested in the use of the gods' names in place-names can, however, easily study the maps in de Vries's *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie*, 12:1–2 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1956–1957), if they have a German-English dictionary at hand.

Students wishing to learn more about the history of the Germanic languages in general should turn to Orrin W. Robinson, *Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), and Hans Frede Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages: Origins and Early Dialectal Interrelations* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989). For Scandinavian, turn to Einar Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages: An Introduction to Their History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

## THE CONVERSION OF ICELAND

Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland*, trans. and annotated by Peter Foote, Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series, 6 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1975), is a model of scholarship, and one need look no further, although more complete treatment, and especially an analysis of the central events at the althingi in 1000 C.E., may be found in Jón Hnefill

Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: The Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland with Particular Reference to the Religious Attitudes Prevailing at the Time*, *Studia Ethnologica Upsaliensia*, 4 (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1978). Those deeply pressed for time, those who prefer their history in a popularized form, or those who like pictures could turn to the very short work of Michael Scott Rohan and Allan J. Scott, *The Hammer and the Cross* (Oxford: Alder Publishing, 1980), which presupposes no prior knowledge.

## MEDIEVAL ICELAND

Since virtually all the texts of Scandinavian mythology were recorded in medieval Iceland, a knowledge of that society will be helpful. I recommend Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga saga* (cited above), for the historical background up through the thirteenth century. For an excellent anthropological analysis of the Icelandic commonwealth, see first Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Assessment of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); this work also includes direct commentary on the mythology, especially as regards cosmology. Hastrup's *Island of Anthropology: Studies in Past and Present Iceland*, Viking Collection, 5 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1990), contains other relevant essays by Hastrup, and a collection of essays is to be found in Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Sagas to Society: Contemporary Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock, England: Hisarlik Press, 1992). Books that focus on the interface between history and literature are Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*, trans. John Tucker, *Studia Borealis/Nordic Studies*, 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993; Danish original 1977), and, in the two essays of its introduction, Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), is a detailed and thorough analysis of the processes of dispute resolution as they are manifested in the sagas; these processes are in my view directly relevant to the mythology. Students may also find useful Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), and Byock, *Medieval Iceland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

## WOMEN AND GENDER

The role of women in society and literature has been the subject of several recent investigations. See Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodridge, England: Boydell, 1991); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), and Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). Carol J. Clover argues that gender is less important than power in "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 363–387.

## ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Several encyclopedias offer easy access to relevant information on Norse mythology. Philip Pulsiano, Kirsten Wolf, Paul Acker, and Donald K. Fry, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, 1, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 934 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), offers articles on literary, historical, and archaeological subjects. It supplements the 22-volume Nordic compilation, published in all five Nordic countries, entitled in Swedish *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid från vikingatid till reformationstid* (Malmö, Sweden: Allhems förlag, 1956–1978); the articles are in the Scandinavian languages, but the references may be helpful even to those who cannot read those languages. The *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Joseph R. Strayer, general editor, 13 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1982–1989), has extensive coverage of Scandinavia, including articles on Norse mythology. Similarly, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, editor-in-chief, 16 vols. (New York and London: Macmillan, 1987), contains articles on Indo-European, Germanic, and Scandinavian myth and religion. Those who can read German will find profit in consulting the articles in the new edition of the *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Heinrich Beck et al. (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1973– ), many of which are detailed studies of myths and religious topics in their own right. The *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, 9 vols. (Munich and Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1980–1998), has good articles on medieval history and literature. Scandinavian medieval literature and mythology are also treated in Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow, eds., *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000).

## PRIMARY SOURCES—TRANSLATIONS

Although several attempts have been made to translate the *Poetic Edda*, none has been fully successful, primarily because of the difficulty of the texts themselves in several places. Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction and Notes* (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1923), is still serviceable, although it employs some idiosyncratic spellings (e.g., *Hovamol* for *Hávamál*), and the copious footnotes are to be avoided. Lee M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda: Translated with an Introduction and Explanatory Notes*, 2nd ed., rev. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), uses an archaic English that is not without interest but usually baffles the ordinary reader. Paul B. Taylor and W. H. Auden, *The Elder Edda: A Selection* (New York: Random House, 1967–1969), is the result of a collaboration between a scholar and a distinguished poet, but its arrangement of the poems is arbitrary, and other translations are more literally accurate. Patricia Terry, *Poems of the Vikings: The Elder Edda* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill [1969]), also suffers from lapses in accuracy. The most recent translation into English, useful and accessible, is that of Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Ursula Dronke is producing an edition of eddic poems; in addition to introductions and notes, it contains English translations facing the Icelandic text. Dronke's translations are splendid, but the work as a whole is intended for an academic rather than a general audience. As of this writing, two volumes have appeared: *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1, *Heroic Poems: Edited with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), and *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems: Edited with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997; contains *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*). Finally, Sigurður Nordal's famous and influential edition of *Völuspá*, with commentary, is available in English translation by B. S. Benedikz and John McKinnell, *Durham and St. Andrews Medieval Texts*, 1 (Durham, England: Durham and St. Andrews Medieval Texts, 1978).

The most recent English translation of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* is also the best: Anthony Faulkes, *Edda / Snorri Sturluson: Translated from the Icelandic and Introduced*, Everyman Classics, Everyman's Library, 499 (London: Dent, 1987). A translation of most of the mythological passages is offered by Jean I. Young, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology, Selected and Translated* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, c. 1954). It is accurate, and the introduction by Sigurður Nordal is pleasant, but because it omits most of *Skáldskaparmál* and all of *Háttatal*, it gives a false impression of the work as a whole, and it is not free from occasional bowd-

lerization. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur's *The Prose Edda, by Snorri Sturluson: Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction*, Scandinavian Classics, 5 (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1916), is long out of print but still quite usable.

Some mythological skaldic verses are gathered in Lee M. Hollander, *The Skalds: A Selection of Their Poems, with Introductions and Notes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, for the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, c. 1945); some may also be found translated and explicated in Gabriel Turville-Petre's *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976). Other significant verse may be found in Hollander, *Old Norse Poems: The Most Important Non-Skaldic Verse Not Included in the Poetic Edda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936; reprint, Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973).

The *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus has been rendered into English twice. From the Victorian era is *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Oliver Elton, with "Some Considerations on Saxo's Sources, Historical Methods, and Folk-Lore," by Frederick York Powell, *Publications of the Folk-lore Society*, 33 (London: D. Nutt, 1894). Our era found its Saxo in *The History of the Danes / Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979–1980), which has a very handy commentary by Hilda Ellis Davidson.

Finally, Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), offers readers the chance to consider for themselves the literary evidence for the Scandinavian excursions to North America half a millennium before Columbus; in the context of this work, it is relevant because of the elaborate description of a seid ceremony in chapter 3 of *Eiríks saga rauda* (The Saga of Erik the Red).

## **PRIMARY SOURCES—COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS**

### **Eddic and Skaldic Poetry**

Unfortunately, this is perhaps the area in which one is most handicapped by an inability to read German and the Scandinavian languages. A number of commentaries to eddic poetry have appeared over the years, but all are in German, even the one announced by a team of scholars at Frankfurt and manifest in sample texts. The only commentaries, therefore, are those attached to the translations mentioned above. Dronke's is the most satisfying, but she has placed fairly severe limits on going beyond actual textual issues. Larrington's notes are also sound, but I cannot recommend with any enthusiasm anything else on the eddic corpus.

And the case is all but hopeless for skaldic poetry. There are, to be sure, the commentaries accompanying Turville-Petre's and Hollander's translations, but the texts presented are very limited. There are also, of course, monographic treatments of various important skaldic poems, but these texts are so difficult that such treatments tend generally to limit themselves to comment on language and grammar rather than on content. Those who can read the Scandinavian languages can make use of the corpora and commentaries created by Finnur Jónsson and Ernst Albin Kock; on the problems inherent to these, see Roberta Frank, "Skaldic Poetry," in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, eds., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, *Islandica*, 45 (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

An idiosyncratic study of eddic poetry is Eleazar Meletinskij, *The Elder Edda and Early Forms of the Epic*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober, *Hesperides*, 6, (Trieste: Parnaso, 1998).

### Snorri Sturluson

A biography of Snorri Sturluson and consideration of his writing is Marlene Ciklamini, *Snorri Sturluson*, Twayne's World Authors Series, TWAS 493: Iceland (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978). It lacks the authority of Sigurður Nordal's magisterial *Snorri Sturluson* ([Reykjavík]: Þór. B. Þorláksson, 1920), but that work has never been translated from the original Icelandic. A fine study of Snorri's *Heimskringla* is Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). Recent collections of essays about Snorri and his work include *Snorri: Átta alda minning* (Reykjavík: Sögufelag, 1979), a volume in which Icelandic scholars contemplate eight centuries of the memory of Snorri; Úlfar Bragason, ed., *Snorrastefna: 25.–27. Júlí 1990* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992)—despite the Icelandic title, more than half the essays are in English; Alois Wolf, ed., *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, *Script Oralia*, 51 (Tübingen: G. Narr, c. 1993); and Hans Fix, ed., *Snorri Sturluson: Beiträge zu Werk und Rezeption*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 18 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1998). Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language*, *Viking Collection*, 4 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), sets *Skáldskaparmál* against the learned medieval encyclopedic background. Alexandra Pesch, *Brunaöld, haugsöld, kirkjuöld: Untersuchungen zu den archaologisch überprüfbaren Aussagen in der Heimskringla des Snorri Sturluson*, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Germanistik und Skandinavistik*, 35 (Frankfurt am Main and New York: P. Lang, 1996), reads the archaeological record

against *Heimskringla*. A German commentary (accompanying a translation) to Snorri's *Gylfaginning* that I have found very useful is that of Gottfried Lorenz, *Snorri Sturluson, Gylfaginning: Texte, Übersetzung, Kommentar, Texte zur Forschung*, 48 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984). On *Heimskringla*, see Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, 3 (London: University College, 1991).

## LITERARY HISTORIES

The most recent general survey in English is that of Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988). A collection of essays summarizing the state of scholarship and including extensive bibliographies for myth and mythography, eddic poetry, skaldic poetry, kings' sagas, sagas of Icelanders, and romances is Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, eds., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (cited above). The *fornaldarsögur* are the most important omission from that collection, but it was somewhat remedied by the publication of Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

The relationship between the social conditions and the literature is presented in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's excellent *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature* (cited above). Meulengracht Sørensen is particularly good on mythic patterns in the literature in general. Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, trans. and with notes by Vilhjalmur T. Bjarnar (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 1990) is not, strictly speaking, a literary history, but it offers much that is of interest. Those who read German may turn to Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2 vols., *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie*, 15–16 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1964), but all the other standard literary surveys are in the Scandinavian languages.

## MYTHOLOGY: GENERAL TREATMENTS

Scandinavian myth and religion is a field in which much older work is still read and cited, with the inevitable result that a great percentage of the material is in German and the Scandinavian languages (there is also much of interest in Italian, French, and Russian, among others). It is possible to get a sense of the scholarship up to the early 1980s by consulting my *Scandinavian Mythology: An Annotated Bibliography*, *Garland Folklore Bibliographies*, 13 (New York: Garland, 1988). If there is a standard reference work, it is Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische*

*Religionsgeschichte*, 2 vols., 2nd ed., Grundriss der germanischen Philologie, 12–13 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1956–1967). However, there are many introductory works in English that can be recommended. The best in my view remains that of Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (cited above), but it is long out of print. H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), pays less attention to textual detail than I would like but remains in print and is sound. Davidson also contributed a large-format book originally entitled *Scandinavian Mythology* (London and New York: Hamlyn, 1969) and recently reissued as *Viking and Norse Mythology* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996); this work has especially attractive plates of many of the more significant artifacts. A very brief treatment, but quite nice, is that of R. I. Page, *Norse Myths* (London: British Museum; and Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). A very long treatment is the volume in the older series *Mythology of All Races* by John Arnott MacCulloch (the editor of the series) entitled simply *Eddic* (New York: M. Jones; reprint, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964).

I am not fond of works that in their systematization take readers away from the texts; unlike, say, Greek mythology, Norse mythology is actually found in such a limited textual corpus that it seems to me indefensible to part from it. Thus I cannot recommend the work of the Norwegian historian Peter Andreas Munch, revised by the great philologist Magnus Olsen and available in English as *Norse Mythology: Legends of Gods and Heroes*, trans. Sigure Bernhard Hustvedt (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1927), although the Norwegian version, with comments added by Anne Holtsmark, is definitely worth a look. Nor do I recommend Brian Branston, *Gods of the North* (New York: Vanguard, n.d. [1955?]), or Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths: Introduced and Retold* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

## MYTHOLOGY: IMPORTANT STUDIES

The best modern treatment of the mythology, and one to which every serious reader can turn with profit, is Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, vol. 1, *The Myths*, Viking Collection, 7 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), and vol. 2, *The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland*, Viking Collection, 10 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998). The first volume succeeds admirably in reading the entire mythology as a system in which the ongoing opposition between the gods and giants is read as a struggle involving social hierarchies within a complex symbolic system. Clunies Ross knows the scholarship intimately and has masterful



analytic skills; if you read only one book on the mythology (other than the one in your hands now), make it this one. Volume 2 is of more interest in connection with rest of Old Norse–Icelandic literature, but it is equally enthralling.

Two other recent A-to-Z treatments of the mythology have preceded this one. The earlier was that of Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, cited above; the German original appeared in 1984 in a series of small-format encyclopedias and therefore was presumably formed at least in part to fit the parameters of that series. It is trustworthy and particularly helpful if one is interested in postmedieval manifestations of the mythology in art, literature, and music, for articles ordinarily end with information about such manifestations. Since the work was originally intended for German readers, secondary literature in English is cited only when the author deems it particularly relevant, and full references are not cited. The second such encyclopedia was that of Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, cited above. As is the case with Simek, the scholarship is wholly sound. Orchard's book has greater coverage in that it also takes in heroic legend, and the result is that the mythological entries tend to be somewhat shorter than those in Simek's volume. The book also contains not quite 40 illustrations. A particularly nice touch is the set of appendices listing and offering translations for the numerous names of Odin, dwarfs, giants, and "troll-wives, giantesses and valkyries." Bibliographic citations in the body of the texts are to about 850 items gathered in four lists in the back of the book.

The thinking of Georges Dumézil on Norse mythology and its relationship with Indo-European myth and religion may be found in Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, trans. John Lindow, Alan Toth, Francis Charat, and George Gopen, Publications of the UCLA Center for Comparative Folklore and Mythology, 3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973). This book comprises a translation of Dumézil's *Les dieux des germains: Essai sur la formation de la religion scandinave* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), and translations of four articles specifically on Scandinavian mythology. Dumézil's later arguments about the displacement of myth into epic are available in Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The Saga of Hadingus*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), which followed by only three years the French original, *Du mythe au roman: La Saga de Hadingus et autres essais* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970). His huge study *Mythe et épopée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968–1975) was rendered piecemeal into English: *The Destiny of a King*, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973); *Camillus: A Study of Indo-European Religion as Roman History*, trans. Annette Aronowicz and Josette Bryson, ed. Udo Strutynski (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980); *The Stakes of the Warrior*, trans. David Weeks, ed. Jaan

Puhvel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983); *The Plight of a Sorcerer*, ed. Jaan Puhvel and David Weeks (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986). Those who long for more Dumézil but cannot read French could turn next to his *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1988), a classic of the Dumézilian dossier, or the curious *Riddle of Nostradamus: A Critical Dialogue*, trans. Betsy Wing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). For a vade mecum through the many ins and outs of Dumézil's work up to 1980 or so, see C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982). An incisive non-Dumézilian reading is offered by Jarich G. Oosten, *The War of the Gods: The Social Code in Indo-European Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1985).

Two recent works by Hilda Ellis Davidson, who has contributed greatly to the study of Norse mythology, are *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), and *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Where Davidson explores the Celtic interface, Thomas DuBois reminds us of the existence of the religions of the Sámi and Finns in Viking Age Scandinavia: *Viking Ages Religions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

A connection between the texts of eddic poetry and ritual was first argued by Bertha Philpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1920). Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 1995), revisits the issue.

## NONPRINT RESOURCES

Keying "Norse mythology" into the Google search engine on the world wide web, I got 8,540 hits. Clearly there is a lot of stuff out there. At <http://www.pantheon.org/mythica/areas/norse/>, one of the first sites I visited, I found an A-to-Z listing of the major and minor figures in Norse mythology similar to what is found in this book. This listing is part of *The Encyclopedia Mythica: An Encyclopedia on Mythology, Folklore, and Legend*. Randomly looking at some entries, I found this on Bragi:

The god of eloquence and poetry, and the patron of skalds (poets) in Norse mythology. He is regarded as a son of Odin and Frigg. Runes were carved on his tongue and he inspired poetry in humans by letting them drink from the mead of poetry. Bragi is married to Idun, the goddess of eternal youth. Oaths

were sworn over the Bragarfull (Cup of Bragi), and drinks were taken from it in honor of a dead king. Before a king ascended the throne, he drank from such a cup.

There are no fewer than six errors in this paragraph (the lingual runes being the most spectacular), and this sad fact leads me to the major point that must be made about materials to be found on the Internet: *Use them at your own risk.* Content is easy to find, but there is no quality control. The Internet is best used to look at things like maps, images (samples of actual Old Norse–Icelandic manuscripts, for example, may be viewed at <http://www.hum.ku.dk/ami>), or the actual text of some primary source. (There are many Internet sites offering primary sources, but my comments in Chapter 4 about primary sources apply here, too.)

I know of two sites with bibliographies. *The Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies*, at the University of Odense Library in Denmark, covers the entire field, not just the mythology. Its English-language URL is <http://www.sdu.dk/oub/fagomraa/nordisk/boniseng.htm>. A very brief bibliography of the *Poetic Edda* compiled at the Fiske Icelandic Collection of the Cornell University Library may be found at <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/Fiske/edda.html>.

Scott Trimble, a former student in my undergraduate class at the University of California at Berkeley on Scandinavian mythology, has built the website <http://www.stst.net/Scandinavian/>. The genealogy page is a brave attempt to concoct a single genealogy for the entire system. Browsing sites that sell term papers, I found that one can obtain an eight-page paper titled “The Giant Loki in Norse Mythology” for \$8.95 per page (a few months later the price had risen to \$9.95). I didn’t buy it, but skimming the summary gave me the impression that I may in fact have already read it.

Look about on the Internet. You will find descriptions of the mythology; encyclopedic listings long and short; student term papers; collections of texts; collections of pictures; close and imaginative retellings of the myths; fiction; poetry and music; Wiccan sites; neopagan sites of various kinds, some including on-line shrines; games; rants and ravings; course curricula; children’s literature; comic books; clubs to join; sites devoted in whatever way to individual gods and goddesses; a “scavenger hunt” (actually a list of questions apparently used in a unit on the mythology in some school); a “guest book” to which you can post any comment you like relating, however tenuously, to Norse mythology; instructions to third-grade teachers doing a unit on Norse mythology; instructions for integrating the study of Norse mythology into home schooling; science fiction; astrology. Just exercise care. If it doesn’t look right, it probably isn’t. After all, if I, an expert in Old Norse–Icelandic mythology, were to devise and print on the Internet plans for a supersonic jet, would you build and fly it?

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