

The myths of Northern Europe reflect a universe in which the physical environment often threatens human survival. Consequently, Norse (Germanic) myths are populated with evil giants and monsters that heroes—both divine and mortal—challenge in combat.

The myths were recorded primarily in Iceland during the thirteenth century A.D. It is not surprising that these myths depict a depressed and burdened society. The people faced long, cold winters, short growing seasons that often yielded a less-than-abundant harvest, and a lack of sophisticated medical knowledge. In Norse myths, it is impossible to escape Fate. According to these tales, everything in the Northern peoples' existence is predetermined, so they must accept their destiny without question or rebellion. The Norse gods have human personalities, and they interact with one another and with the giants in many delightful myths, such as "The Theft of Thor's Hammer." However, unlike the gods of the Greeks and the Sumerians, Norse gods involve themselves with human beings only on rare occasions.

The Norse gods share the same unalterable fate that mortals do. When Ragnarok, the last great battle, occurs, famous human warriors will fight alongside the gods against the giants. Nevertheless, the gods will be defeated by the giants. Odin, ruler of the gods, knows their destiny is defeat, but he can do nothing to change it.

The Norse creation myth introduces the major concept of the conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The myth describes the destiny of the universe from its creation to the destruction and inevitable death of the gods and mortals.

The fertility myth of Balder is a central part of the creation myth. Like other Norse myths, it has been lifted from its earlier, agricultural culture and has been transplanted into the more aggressive Viking age, with an increased emphasis on death.

The myth of Sigurd provides the basis for the story of Siegfried in Richard Wagner's famous cycle of operas, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. Like *The Odyssey*, the myth of Sigurd is one of the world's great adventure stories. The idea of a curse on a gold ring that destroys whoever possesses it is the root of many a modern tale, including J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In this myth, Sigurd's great love, Brunhild, is the original Sleeping Beauty. As in the other major Norse myths, unalterable

Fate dominates *Sigurd the Volsung*. The saga's characters shine brilliantly against the blackness of their fate, but they are doomed, and they know it.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The acceptance of Christianity in Iceland in A.D. 1000 formally brought pagan beliefs to an end in that country. However, many of the monks enjoyed the old poems and stories enough to record them.

During the next few centuries, many people thought that the gods Odin and Thor really existed as evil spirits who tempted human beings with evil thoughts and deeds. In response to such ideas, in about 1220 Snorri Sturluson wrote *Gylfaginning* (*The Deluding of Gylfi*). It tells the story of the creation of the world and other myths from the Norse, or Germanic, tradition.

NORSE RELIGION

The Norse gods reflect the nature and values of the people who worshipped them. Not only do the Norse gods speak and act like human beings, but they too are subject to the Norns (the Fate Maidens) and face the inescapable destiny of death. Like human beings, the Norse gods know and accept their fate and are determined to face it with courage and dignity. Like many of the human beings who worship them, they choose to die in battle. They kill the evil giants to make the world a better place for future generations.

Except for Odin, who occasionally helps a great hero such as Sigurd, the Norse gods do not protect human beings from the dangers of living. They usually keep to themselves, and their adventures involve the giants rather than humans. Similarly, the tales of human heroes do not usually include the gods.

The hierarchy of the Norse gods reflects the class divisions of Norse society. The Norse kings, as members of the warrior aristocracy, claimed Odin as their patriarch. Odin is both the god of war and the god of poetry. He brings both victory and defeat to warriors, and he inspires the court poets who create epics and songs about heroes and their battles. A fierce god, Odin demands human sacrifice from those who worship him.

Thor is the son of Odin and Frigg. Second to Odin among the Norse gods, he was worshipped by the peasant farmers, who needed his strength and dependability. Thor's hammer, Mjollnir, causes thunder and lightning, and is therefore related to the rain that helps produce abundant crops. Thor also uses his hammer to protect both Asgard, the home of the gods, and Midgard (Middle Earth), the home of mortals, from the evil giants.

Frey is the third most important Norse god. He is the son of Njord, god of plenty from the sea, and he is a fertility god like his father. Frey determines when the sun will shine and when the rain will fall. People prayed to him, his father, and his sister, Freya, for bountiful harvests and children. Like Odin, Frey demands human sacrifice from his worshippers.

Frigg and Freya are the most important Norse goddesses. Both are Great Goddesses or Mother Goddesses and are worshipped for their powers to bring fertility to the land and to people.

APPEAL AND VALUE

Its broad cast of characters and great adventure make the Norse creation myth appealing. We recognize the giants, dwarves, and elves from our fairy tale heritage, which has Norse, or Germanic, roots. The concepts of gods who die and a world that is destroyed and reborn are fascinating. Readers of J. R. R. Tolkien will recognize that many names in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy derive from Norse mythology, as do the names in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series.

PRINCIPAL GODS

ODIN (also, Woden, meaning "wild" or "filled with fury"): ancient Indo-European god of wind; son of Bor and Bestla; oldest and greatest of the gods; father and ruler of the gods; father of mortals, giving life and soul; god of war

FRIGG: originally, a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess; wife of Odin; mother of the gods; most important goddess; knows everyone's fate but does not reveal it

THOR: son of Odin and Frigg; second greatest god; strongest of all gods and mortals; god of thunder

BALDER: son of Odin and Frigg; most gentle and best loved of the gods

HODER: son of Odin and Frigg; blind brother of Balder

HERMOD: courageous son of Odin and Frigg

BRAGI: son of Odin and Frigg; husband of Idun; god of wisdom and poetry

IDUN: wife of Bragi; keeps the golden apples of eternal youth

NJORD (meaning "enclosing ships" or "the sea"): god of fertility; ruler of the winds and the sea

FREY: son of Njord; god of fertility of the earth and of mortals; ruler of the sun and rain; third most important god

FREYA: originally, a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess; daughter of Njord; gives advice about love; second most important goddess

HEIMDALL: ancient Indo-European god of fire, similar to Agni, the Hindu god of fire; watchman of the gods

HOENIR: ancient Indo-European god; son of Bor and Bestla; brother of Odin; along with Odin, father of mortals, giving intelligence and emotion; after Ragnarok, ruler of the surviving gods

LOKI: son of two frost Giants, but considered a god; evil mischief-maker

HEL: monstrous daughter of Loki; ruler of the dead in Nilfheim