Norse Mythology

The Heroes, Gods, Sagas, Beliefs, and Rituals of Nordic Mythology

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Introduction

I want to thank you and congratulate you for grabbing a copy of my book, *Norse Mythology: The Heroes, Gods, Sagas, Beliefs, and Rituals of Nordic Mythology*.

In this book, you will find a brief but comprehensive overview of the myths and religious beliefs underlying the gods, monsters, heroes, and heroines of Norse mythology.

You may already be familiar with names and personalities such as Odin, Thor, Loki, and the Valkyries – and in this book you will learn about the many roles that they play within the various legends and sagas that have been passed down from generation to generation. You will learn about the impact that they have made on both the ancient Scandinavian cultures from where the stories arose, and on modern culture in northern Europe.

You will also learn how Norse mythology has become a leading source of storytelling ideas, and how the concepts and characters have found their way into works as diverse as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Gaiman’s *American Gods*; the operas that make up Wagner’s acclaimed *The Ring of the Nibelung*; the musical genres of heavy metal and, specifically, Viking metal; and many others.

Finally, I hope that reading about Norse mythology will help you gain a better understanding of the ancient cultures of Scandinavia: specifically, how these people saw the world and how they perceived themselves as they fit into that world.
Thanks again for getting this book, I hope you enjoy it!
Chapter 1

Norse Culture and the Importance of Mythology

From perhaps the very dawn of time, human beings have found themselves compelled to perform different actions in order to survive. We have hunted animals for their meat and for the rest of the resources that we could scavenge from their dead bodies. We have foraged for fruits and vegetables and the many other products from trees, shrubs, and grass. We have fought off predators, whether they were of our own species or of others. And, we have gathered in groups partly because of the idea of safety in numbers and partly because larger numbers meant a greater chance of survival for a longer time.

So what happened within those groups when the sun had set, taking away the light that was needed for successful hunting and foraging? What happened when the cold seasons came, or the storms? What did we do? We have made tools. We have looked after our young ones and our elders. We sang and danced. And we have told stories.

It might look useless on the surface, but think about it: if we didn’t know how to tell tales, if we didn’t naturally turn to making them up in order to better understand the world, then we wouldn’t be able to pass on our skills and our knowledge to succeeding generations. These stories could capture the interest of the group; they could impart important skills and necessary warnings, and could even explain how the world works. Stories had their uses – sure, many of them were little more than amusing little yarns, told just to pass the time. But some of them were epic world-spanning narratives
that were used to transmit the lessons of history and the ideals that a member of the group should aspire to.

This would have been especially true during the winters in northern Europe. These elaborate accounts would have provided not just a means of passing the time, but also needed diversions for the family and for the community. The stories told in the night would serve many functions. For children, stories taught them about their history and culture, and could teach them the skills that they would need to learn in order to contribute to the community – including the very necessary skill of learning their letters. For adults, the stories affirmed their shared struggles and shared heritage. Everyone would benefit from telling and retelling these same stories, and not just to forget the long dark hours before the short period of daylight could begin again.

For many people, the word “mythology” refers to a specific group of stories: stories of gods and monsters and heroes and war. Why are those stories referred to as myths? Because the gods and monsters and heroes and wars act out history. They explain the world as the storytellers understand it and they pass on customs and beliefs.

Most people think of the Greco-Roman gods and their follies when they hear the word “mythology” because those stories have been spread through various methods: travel, conquest, and – especially in the modern day – the sharing of Western culture through mass media.

It might be possible to say that for a long time Norse mythology was somewhat overlooked, lurking under the radar of popular culture, thanks to Christianity and its unhappy tendency to lump all other religious belief systems under the derogatory term “pagan”. But the names have persisted – and in the case of the days of the week, we use them over and over again, thoughtlessly, just as a means of marking the passage of time. Nowadays, it
is pretty easy to have a conversation about the modern versions of characters such as Thor and Loki – and, again, we have Western culture and the mass media to thank for that.

But if we take away the comic books, the musical references, and the modern reinterpretations, who are these characters, really? Who are they in their original contexts and in their original stories?

Let’s take Thor as an example. Featured in many a tale for his godly martial prowess, he has come down through the ages and sagas as the one member of the pantheon who seemed to feel true compassion for mortal men and women. Though his father, Odin, bestowed great gifts on humanity, the older god was greatly preoccupied by the looming specter of defeat and the end of all worlds, leaving Thor to take special care of the mortal world. How did he do it? By fighting and defeating the marauding giants who were a perpetual threat not just to humans, but to the gods themselves as well.

And, that is actually Norse mythology in a nutshell. When the stories were new, northern Europe was a world of long days at work, fierce battles between rival families, missionaries who were dogged and ruthless in spreading their religion, and the dark winter nights. The Vikings believed that they lived in a somber world, even though they could bring back great riches from their sea raids and even though they could earn great amounts of gold from trading their goods.

As a form of respecting those beliefs, the storytellers did their attentive audiences the favor of never sugar-coating the stories. They could throw in a few riddles or create the hope that someone might stumble over some storied treasure, or embellish the action in battles that were already exciting in and of themselves – but they never shied away from the idea that life
outside the four walls of home or the makeshift enclosures surrounding their villages would always be full of dangers both known and unknown.

We must give some credit to the countless men and women who told and retold the legends that soon became codified into the corpus of Norse mythology, however, because they still tried their best to include some kind of hope, some thread of redemption, into the stories of fallen heroes and gods who could be killed. Here, at the very beginning of this book, are the lines that talk about the morning after the end of the world, where new men and new gods wake up to a new heaven and a new earth:

_In wondrous beauty once again_

_The dwellings roofed with gold_

_The fields unsowed bear ripened fruit_

_In happiness forevermore._

These lines are taken from Edith Hamilton’s brief look into Norse mythology, in her classic work _Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes_.

However, before we plunge full-tilt into the tales of Norse mythology, we must first take a look at the sources of the stories.
The stories and verses that make up the great majority of Norse mythology started out as part of a purely oral tradition, passed on from one generation to another by storytellers. Some of these stories were told and retold by family members, and some were composed and made popular by court poets.

These poets, or skalds, plied their trade at the courts of the various settlements scattered throughout northern Europe and reached great heights of influence and popularity in the Viking Age and during the Middle Ages. In keeping with the oral transmission of culture that was common in those settlements, their main task was to retell the old stories in ways that would arouse the interest of their audiences; later on, they also became the chroniclers and repositories of history.

Poetry was the skald’s stock in trade; some became quite skilled at telling stories of the gods, while others told stories of the mythic heroes and their far-ranging quests. Later on, the skalds would also learn how to create poetry that would praise their respective patrons or liege lords, often giving those rulers some of the attributes of the gods or of the legendary heroes themselves.

As poetry in and of itself can be wide-ranging, the skalds could similarly create stories on many other subjects. After all, a ruler might soon get tired of the same old verses on the same old subjects. To rise higher in the esteem of the court, a skald might come up with stories about various encounters
with the supernatural – not the gods themselves, but the other spirits and strange beings that were believed to inhabit the same world that humans did. The Viking courts were just as fond of romantic poetry as they were of sagas, and they were even known to pay close attention to verses written about familial and marital life and discord.

Though the skalds’ primary task was to speak – or recite – and impart their stories and poetry to the crowds at court, they also became the first to compile the various tales and commit them to more permanent forms, such as on paper, and then in books.

Both men and women could be initiated into the art of the skald, and because the art of the skald was seen as one of high merit and renown, some of its practitioners branched out by writing down their advice and the standards of the profession, creating what could be referred to as technical manuals. Today, much of our knowledge about the craft of the skalds – as well as the stories themselves – survive in one such manual, known as the Prose Edda. Snorri Sturluson is credited as the book’s author and compiler; it was published in the early 13th century and was explicitly supposed to serve as a textbook for skalds.

The Prose Edda is actually half a textbook and half a compilation of the legends and tales that were already being told by the skalds. The prologue concerns itself with a somewhat sanitized account of the origins of Norse mythology; he presents the gods – from Odin on down – as soldiers who, after surviving the Trojan War, made their way to northern Europe, where they became the leaders of various tribes and family groups. After they died, elaborate religious rituals were held at their burial sites every year – and those rituals turned into the basis of a pagan cult. On the other hand, the
section called *Gylfaginning* concerns itself with an account of the creation and eventual destruction of the universe.

The second and third sections, known as *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal* respectively, deal with the art of the skald. They feature in-depth discussions of poetic language and the verse forms that make up the corpus of Old Norse poetry. It is also in the *Skáldskaparmál* that a formal discussion of the kenning appears.

Kennings are a critical part of the telling and retellings of the stories of Norse mythology. They are figures of speech that refer to a specific place, person, thing, or idea in an ambiguous or roundabout way. Instead of saying “the sea” in a given verse, for example, a skald might say, “whale-road” or “whale’s way”. Instead of saying “fire”, he might use “bane of wood”. When these descriptive phrases are applied to the gods and other beings, some of their primary attributes emerge in short and vivid phrases: Odin is the “hanged god” and the “lord of the gallows”, while Thor is the “slayer of the giants of Jotunheim”.

Together with the *Prose Edda*, the *Poetic Edda* stands as one of the other primary sources for the stories that have become part of the Norse mythology. This second *Edda* is a collection of ballads, sayings, and other verses in Old Norse. A majority of the material in this *Edda* is attested to in an ancient book known as the *Codex Regius*, which scholars currently believe to have been written in the 1270s.

As with the *Prose Edda*, stories that had been previously passed by word of mouth make up the majority of the entries in the *Poetic Edda*. Among the best-known of the mythological tales preserved in this *Edda* are the *Völuspá* and the *Lokasenna*. 
In contrast with the prose version of the story that is presented in the first section of the *Prose Edda*, *Völuspá*’s account of the creation and destruction of the worlds – and what happens afterward – is presented in poetic form, and specifically as a recitation by a female seer to an audience that includes both ordinary human beings and Odin himself. The narrative also speaks of various races such as giants, the Aesir (the group that Odin leads and belongs to), the Vanir (originally a separate group of gods until they were subsumed into the Aesir), dwarfs, and of human beings. The story winds through what seems like an inexorable, inevitable chain of events that leads to the doom of the worlds and of the gods alike – which is also known by the famous name of *Ragnarök*.

A section known as the *Dvergatal* is included in this account; these verses consist almost entirely of a listing of names of dwarfs.

The sense of impending doom in *Völuspá* is almost entirely at odds with the vitriol and thoroughgoing rudeness in *Lokasenna*. This poem helps to establish the strange relationship that the god Loki has with the other members of the pantheon: sometimes he is their ally, sometimes they can just barely tolerate his presence, and sometimes, he is their sworn enemy – as is the result here. The Aesir gather at the hall of the sea god Aegir, and proceed to make merry – but the party is cut short when they hear that Loki has killed one of their host’s servants. They drive him from the party, but he barges back in, and as the verses proceed, Loki systematically insults the beings within the hall.

A short prose section at the end of the poem details the punishment that the gods impose on Loki for his tirades – and while some modern commentators might find that punishment to be an excessive one, the poem also shows us what Loki did wrong: namely, he killed one of his host’s
servants and threatened to do the same to the other. He also accuses every single one of the female members of the Aesir present at the hall of sexual impropriety, to the point that the verses almost begin to repeat themselves.

A series of poems included in the *Codex Regius* is known as the Niflung Cycle – but while Western audiences might be more familiar with these verses in their German form, the *Nibelungenlied*, the Norse version tells a thrilling story in its own right.

Known as the *Völsunga saga*, these stories talk about the trials and tribulations that befall the descendants of a ruler named Volsung: from the incestuous relationship that comes about between his children Sigmund and Signy, and the eventual fate of his grandson Sigurd, who encounters both Odin and the Valkyrie Brynhild.

The stories that make up Norse mythology also make up the first ten books of the historical text known as the *Gesta Danorum*. However, because the text was written in Latin, the names for various groups of characters have been changed to suit, so that the Valkyries are referred to as the Amazons, for example. This source is also notable for changing the relationship between Odin and Thor: whereas in Norse mythology, they are always referred to as father and son, in *Gesta Danorum* Odin becomes Zeus whose son is Mercury and Thor becomes a different deity entirely.

The stories and sagas that make up the corpus of Norse mythology are not limited to ancient texts or books, and are definitely no longer confined to the oral tradition. Many places that were visited by Vikings, or that hosted their settlements, retain traces of that culture in the form of runestones. As might be easily guessed from the name, these are usually upright stones into which inscriptions using the runic alphabet of the Norsemen have been carved. They were often used as memorials to the dead.
Many of these runestones also include images of men and warriors – and a number of these images have been identified as representations of the characters that populate Norse mythology. For example, Thor appears on the Altuna Runestone in Uppsala, Sweden, where he is shown struggling with the great serpent Jörmungandr; while the Stenkvista runestone in the Södermanland County, which is also located in Sweden, features a carving of Thor’s famous hammer Mjölnir.

Although runestones were used as construction material by those cultures that supplanted the Norsemen, many have survived to the present day, and have been preserved both as a part of the historical record and as reminders of the religious beliefs of the culture that raised them.
Chapter 3
The Gods of Norse Mythology

People today are familiar with the names of gods such as Thor, Odin, Frigga, and many others, thanks to the popular culture and the ongoing phenomena of the Viking revival and of neopaganism. These tend to be modern interpretations of these various deities, however, and are in many ways removed from their original versions.

So who were the real gods and goddesses of Norse mythology?

The answer to this question can immediately lead to confusion because there were two distinct groups of god-like beings to deal with: the Aesir and the Vanir, with the former group being the more well-known one. What are the differences between the two? What are the similarities?

The Aesir is the more familiar group in terms of the gods and goddesses of Norse mythology; this group includes Odin, his sons Thor and Baldr, and others. The attributes of these gods were mainly connected to elemental forces and to strength in war.

On the other hand, the members of the Vanir have attributes that are mainly connected to agriculture, fertility (both of the land and of human beings), and magic. This group includes Njord and his children Freyr and Freyja, among others.

Both the Poetic and the Prose Eddas tell of the various interactions between the two groups of deities: they negotiated with each other for various treaties, and fought various battles – and those battles eventually led to an
all-out war. The end result was that the two groups merged into one, leaving
the single pantheon known as the Aesir.

Some scholars have speculated on the idea of this war between two groups of
gods with very different functions: they think of it as something like a
war between social classes, the warrior (the Aesir) vs. the farmer (the
Vanir).

One thing these two groups did have in common, however, was the
knowledge that the universe in which they lived was doomed to come to an
end. Let’s meet the gods.

Odin
Odin, Known by hundreds of names such as “Allfather”, the “Hanged One”, and “War-merry”, is the principal god of the Norse pantheon. While he is famous as a healer and as a wanderer, he is equally renowned for being a warrior and a ruler. Many sources depict him as an old man with a thick white beard who wanders down many roads while wrapped in a cloak and hat and leaning upon a walking stick.

The majority of the tales of Norse mythology reference Odin in one way or another, and many of them refer to the sacrifices that he made in order to bring great gifts to mortal men and women.

Why is Odin missing one of his eyes? One of the most common stories about him tells about his journey to a well that was guarded by Mímir, a being who was renowned for his knowledge of all things. Odin asked Mímir if he could drink from the well and was told that he would have to give up one of his eyes as the price for that drink. Odin did not hesitate: he plucked out his eye and threw it into the well, then drank from its waters.

He stole the mead of poetry, a magical beverage that could make any person who drank it into a great skald, through trickery and shapeshifting, and distributed it among the gods and among human beings who were worthy of it.

But perhaps the greatest sacrifice that he made in pursuit of knowledge was the one that he made in order to obtain eighteen charms of power: he hanged himself upon the tree that supported all of the worlds, wounded by a spear and sacrificed to Odin – that is, he sacrificed himself to himself. He hung there for nine whole nights, without any food or drink or company, and finally fell from the tree after he had learned the eighteen charms.
Many creatures and important objects are associated with Odin, from his two ravens Huginn and Muninn (Thought and Memory), and his two wolves Geri and Freki. The food that is laid before Odin at the banqueting table is for these creatures, while Odin sustains himself on nothing but wine. He is also the owner of the great spear Gungnir and the eight-legged horse Sleipnir.

Odin is associated with a group of beautiful young women who wear armor and carry shining weapons: these women are the Valkyries who go to the places where battles have taken place and choose a portion of the slain warriors to go with them to the place called Valhalla. These warriors are then known as einherjar.

Thanks to his hard-earned wisdom and the prophecies that he receives at various points in his life, Odin already knows how he is going to die: he knows that he will lead the einherjar into battle at the end of the world. He knows that he will die while fighting the monster-wolf named Fenris. He knows that he will be avenged by one of his own sons. He knows that he will have no place in the new universe that will be created in the aftermath of Ragnarök.
So, it makes sense that the stories and the art depict a god who almost never smiles and spends a lot of time thinking deep thoughts.

**Vili and Vé**

Vili and Vé are the brothers of Odin. Together with their more celebrated brother, they took a personal hand in the creation of the universe. They killed the giant Ymir and filled up the void in which that creature had been living, using the parts of Ymir’s body to create the land, the waters, the sky, and so on.

![Image of Vili and Vé](image-url)

**Frigg**

Frigg in stark contrast to Odin who had to go to great lengths in order to find wisdom, the goddess Frigg already possesses knowledge of many things that will come to pass. Even in dreams, she can see the future; and in some poems, she is said to remain tight-lipped about what she knows, which is the future fate of every single living creature.
She plays a prominent part in the story of her son, Baldr; after he begins to share her prophetic dreams, mother and son come to the conclusion that his life is in danger. Frigg leaves her great hall and the company of the gods and wanders throughout all of creation; she asks everything that she comes across to promise not to hurt her son – but somehow she overlooks the plant called mistletoe because it was too small in size or too young in age.

The gods play a game of throwing things at Baldr, and every object is deflected away from him – except for a dart made out of mistletoe. That dart killed the beloved god and sets all the Aesir to weeping.

Still, Frigg would not give up on her son; she calls for a messenger who would bargain for his life with the dread queen of the underworld. The queen says that if all living things weep for Baldr, she would return him to the land of the living. But a female giant refuses to weep, dashing Frigg’s last hopes and giving rise to her first great sorrow.
Thor, the popular depiction of the god of thunder is as a handsome, beardless, blond young man; the actual image is a little bit different, according to the source texts as he is described as having red hair and a similarly red beard. He is noted for his great strength and is associated with storms, thunder and lightning, as well as with the protection of mortal men and women.

His major task is to fight the gods’ great enemies, from the giants to the monstrous serpent Jörmungandr, and to that end he carries the famed hammer Mjölnir. The magic belt named Megingjörð increases his strength and the iron gloves named Járngreipr make it easier for him to carry his hammer.

Thor is the son of Odin and the earth itself, which was personified into the goddess Jord, and is commonly held to be the husband of the goddess Sif. While many tales speak of Thor’s martial prowess, he does seem to also be the source of comedy in at least one poem. Upon finding out that his hammer has been stolen by a giant, he asks Loki for help in looking for it –
and Loki brings back the news that the giant will only return Mjölnir in exchange for the hand of the goddess Freyja in marriage.

Freyja refuses to be wed to the giant, and the gods then come up with the plan to disguise Thor as Freyja and send “her” to the hall of the giant to retrieve Mjölnir. Thor nearly gives himself away because of his voracious appetite and his flashing eyes, but Loki buys him just enough time for the hammer to be given to him – and once he gets his weapon back, he lays waste to the hall and administers a severe beatdown to the giants gathered there.

*It is Thor’s task to kill Jörmungandr at the end of the world – and he wins his last bit of fame by surviving that serpent’s deadly poison just long enough to take nine steps away from its massive carcass. But in the end, he, too, must succumb to the wounds and to the poison, and he is one of the gods who will not survive into the new universe.*
**Baldr**

The son of Odin and Frigg, twin brother of the blind god Hoder, and the most beloved of all the members of the Aesir, Baldr is said to carry within him an unparalleled grace, as well as his own special wisdom. While he ostensibly died by his own brother’s hand, the ultimate mastermind of that death was none other than Loki.

Before Baldr’s death, it might have been possible to prevent the end of all worlds from happening; with his death, the entire future – and doom – of the Aesir was set in stone.

Baldr’s wife was the goddess Nanna, and his son was the god Forseti. Nanna dies of heartbreak and grief when she sees Baldr laid out on the ship that will become his funeral pyre, and her body is placed beside his. Odin also offers up the magical ring Draupnir to be burned on that pyre, as well as the horse that Baldr had ridden.

He is one of the four sons of Odin who will live on in the wake of Ragnarök, and who will rule over that paradise that is to come. Baldr and his blind twin Hoder will be brought back to life, while Váli who was sired expressly for the purpose of avenging Baldr’s death, and Vidarr whose task is to kill the wolf Fenris after it has murdered Odin, will survive the great battle.
Freyr

Freyr, in contrast to the primarily warlike aspects of gods such as Odin and Thor, was born a member of the Vanir and then joined the Aesir. He is more commonly revered as a god of agriculture and prosperity, and in some ancient temples, his likeness or statue would be adorned with an immense phallus in order to denote that he could bestow fertility on the land as well as upon beasts and men.

However, he was not lacking in martial prowess, and this is made clear by his possession of a sword that could fight off enemies even when no one was holding it. He loses this sword, however, in his quest to woo the beautiful female giant Gerd – and while she does consent to become his wife, he is left without a weapon, and that is a sign that he will perish at the end of the universe, during the final battle between the gods and their monstrous opponents. Some translators have even suggested that Freyr will be killed with his own sword.
Other items associated with Freyr are Gullinbursti, a boar with a golden mane who serves as the god’s steed; and a ship called Skíðblaðnir, which could sail anywhere because it always had favorable winds filling its sails – and which could then be folded up like a handkerchief and tucked away into a pocket when not needed.

Under the name Yngvi-Freyr, this god is held to be the ancestor of the legendary kings of Sweden who as his descendants called themselves Ynglings.

Freyja

Freyja, the twin sister of Freyr is revered as a goddess in her own right, first among the Vanir and then the Aesir. She seems to be a contradictory figure in terms of her spheres of influence, but, she is also associated with love, beauty, and fertility – and with war and death as well. However, her strongest association is with magic, especially in the form known as seid – she is held to have taught seid to the rest of the Aesir, who then became
proficient in it to various degrees. One of her best students was Odin himself.

Freyja is as equally famed for her possessions as for her own qualities: the jeweled item Brisingamen, which has been variously interpreted as a necklace or as a collar; and the falcon-feathered cloak that would often be lent out to other gods who had need of it.

Odin and his Valkyries take only a portion of the dead men who fall on the field of battle – and Freyja is said to take the rest. She rides to the scene in a cart or chariot drawn by great cats.

Like Odin, she is said to accumulate many names because she spends a lot of time looking for her absent husband, the god Odr. He wanders in far lands and among strange people and gives a different name to every tribe and every settlement that she comes across – and all the while, it is said that she weeps tears of red gold. She has two daughters by her wandering spouse, Hnoss and Gersemi.
Heimdallr, with his keen hearing and eyesight, and his position by the rainbow-colored bridge Bifröst, plus his foretold role of calling the gods to Ragnarök by blowing the great horn called Gjallarhorn, it is easy to see why Heimdallr can be understood to fulfill the role of the guardian or gatekeeper of the gods.

Some scholars have pointed out his seeming keenness of hearing – the poems say that he can hear the rustling of grass as it grows, and all the other sounds – and that he might have sacrificed one of his ears to gain that keenness as if to parallel Odin who gave up one of his eyes in order to gain wisdom.

Heimdallr is described as having gold teeth and the son of nine mothers, all sisters. He is also said to have been the god who divided humanity into different social classes; he did this by assuming a different appearance and the false name Rígr who wandered to different farms and dined with the couples who lived on those farms. He would spend three nights on each farm, lying between the couple on their bed, and then move on. When the wives that he visited became pregnant, their children became the originators of the three major social classes among the Vikings: the thralls, who were slaves; the karls, who were free peasants, and the jarls, who were nobles and aristocrats.

Aside from blowing his horn to signal the beginning of Ragnarök, Heimdallr will also fight in the battle; his enemy is Loki, and the two of them are fated to kill each other.
Týr

A god of war and of the law, Týr completes the apparent group of members of the Aesir who are missing a part of their bodies: one-eyed Odin, possibly one-eared Heimdallr, and one-handed Týr. Many scholars see him as the equivalent of the Roman god of war, Mars.

The story goes that Týr lost his hand because the gods wished to bind the great wolf Fenris, as if to forestall the end of the universe. They tried to use ordinary materials such as rope and leather to do so, but the wolf broke through those bindings quite easily. Eventually, the gods called upon the dwarfs for help and they responded by creating the ribbon Gleipnir from, as the poems say: “the sound of a cat’s footfall, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird”.

On the last attempt to bind Fenris, the wolf felt that the gods might be planning to play a trick on him, so he consented to be bound only if one of the gods placed his hand in the wolf’s mouth. Only Týr was brave enough to volunteer, so the gods tied the wolf up in the magical ribbon. This time, Fenris could not break out of his bindings and in his rage, he bit off the hand that had been in his mouth.
At Ragnarök, Týr will kill the vicious great dog Garm, and will be killed by that dog in return.
Chapter 4
Inhabitants of the Universe

While the various exploits and adventures of the Aesir and their extended kin provide a lot of material with which to create the stories that make up Norse mythology, those stories would not be complete without the various other races that directly participate in the action, or are affected by it.

Aside from the gods, the world in which the stories of Norse mythology take place is populated by giants, dwarfs, elves, and humans.
**Jötnar**

Variously translated as “ettin” or, more commonly, “giant”, the term Jötnar (Jötunn in the singular) refers to those beings who live beneath or among rocks. Although they often appear as the adversaries of the Aesir, in some stories, they are actually the victims of unprovoked attacks by the gods, while in others, they are able to win victories over those same gods.

Different types of giant appear in the stories: there are clay-giants, fire-giants, mountain-giants, sea-giants, wind-giants, and frost-giants. Sometimes, these giants display the characteristics of their homes and lairs, such as Surtr who seems to be capable of generating or controlling fire. Others, such as Aegir and his wife Rán, live on an island in a hall next to the waves, and are thus described as sea-giants.

In general, giants appear in all shapes and sizes. Some, like the gold-hoarding Fáfnir, are described as hideous, brutish, and ugly; some could assume other shapes, such as Hraesvelgr, who could transform into an eagle; and some are just plain monstrous in appearance. Fenris the wolf and Jörmungandr the serpent certainly fall into that latter group.
For the most part, male giants could take on many shapes. What of the females? Surprisingly, some of them were extremely beautiful: both Gerd and Skadi became the brides of members of the Aesir and were described as captivating.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, it was the giant Ymir who was the first living being to emerge from the void. Massive and monstrous, he was able to give rise to the frost giants – and then he was killed by Odin and his brothers. They then dismembered him to provide the components of creation.

But the most well known member of the Jötnar is Loki – by turns an ally and an enemy to the Aesir as a whole. He features in many of the sagas, tales, and verses as either one of the main characters on the side of the gods, or as the primary antagonist.
Loki

Loki’s popularity, or notoriety, within the stories that make up the corpus of Norse mythology has extended to members of his family and kin group as well.

According to the stories, Loki was the son of the Jötunn Fárbauti and a female named Laufey. Some scholars think that Laufey might have been a member of the Aesir; this may help explain the fact that Loki is frequently given the additional epithet “Laufeyjarson”. His mother’s blood may also have been his entree into the halls where the other gods and goddesses lived. On the other hand, Loki’s association with fire may have been inherited from his father Fárbauti. Loki’s brothers are named Helblindi and Býleistr.

In contrast to the uncertainty surrounding his parents, there is more definite information to be found on Loki’s spouse and offspring. His wife, Sigyn, is a member of the Aesir and seems to be determined to stay by her husband’s
side no matter how he might aid or attack the rest of the pantheon. She bears Loki two sons, whose names are variously given as Váli (the same as one of the sons of Odin), Narfi, and Nari.

Loki seems to share the other gods’ penchant for engaging in extramarital affairs; the most important of these liaisons is with Angrboda, a female giant. From this union, three offspring are born, none of which can properly be referred to as completely human: the monstrous wolf Fenris, the great serpent Jörmungandr, and Hel, the “dread queen” of the underworld.

Aside from these children – two of whom will become directly responsible for the death or maiming of gods such as Týr and Thor – Loki is also to be held directly responsible for the death of Baldr, which means that he has a direct hand in precipitating Ragnarök.

It was for these deeds and many others – including his wholesale disrespect of the gods when they gathered for a banquet – that Odin and Frigg, who were guided by wisdom and foreknowledge respectively, allowed for Loki to be bound and punished in a uniquely gruesome way.

One of Loki’s sons – the stories are unclear on which – is turned into a wolf and turned loose to maul his brother to death. Then Loki is bound with his dead son’s intestines in a cave beneath the earth, and a serpent whose fangs drip venom is set over him in such a way that the poison falls into his eyes.

In many versions of this particular myth, Sigyn, Loki’s wife, willingly descends into the earth to join her husband in his prison, carrying a bowl or vessel of some kind. She uses it to catch the serpent’s poison, preventing it from falling onto Loki. However, every now and then she has to empty the bowl, and then the poison causes him such pain that he thrashes and groans in his bonds, causing the earth to shake violently.
Loki is the only one who was able to escape his prison at the very onset of Ragnarök, where he will lead the host of Jötnar against their hated enemies, the Aesir.

Dwarfs

It’s hard to imagine Thor without his trusty hammer Mjölnir in his hand, or Odin without his spear Gungnir; likewise, Freyja’s beauty is completed and complemented by the fabulous jewel Brísingamen. What do these items have in common? They were all created by the race of metalsmiths and craftsmen known as the dwarfs. Different groups or families of dwarfs are responsible for different mythical items, from the unbreakable ribbon or binding called Gleipnir, to the items in the possession of the god Freyr (his boar and his ship).
The *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* differ somewhat on the origin of dwarfs, as while both books say that they sprang forth from Ymir’s body, the former says that they were spontaneously generated from the giant’s blood and bones. The latter, on the other hand, says that the dwarfs were mindless parasites embedded in the giant’s flesh and were granted reason by the Aesir. The names of various dwarfs are listed in both books, some being more notable than most. Four in particular, named Norðri (North), Suðri (South), Austri (East), and Vestri (West), are given the specific task of holding up the sky.

What a dwarf, or a group of dwarfs, does in a given Norse myth depends on the narrative itself. Sometimes, they assist the heroes by lending them weapons, armor, or other magical items, and sometimes they are the antagonists, either because they won’t share their creations, or because they want to take the heroes’ possessions for themselves.

One of the myths concerning Thor involves a discussion between the god and a dwarf named Alvíss, who had come to ask for the hand of Thor’s daughter in marriage. As Thor was not inclined to grant his suit, he kept the dwarf up talking throughout the night, all the way until the first rays of the morning sun lit up the horizon and struck Alvíss – who then turned to stone.

While a vast majority of the dwarfs who appear in the stories of Norse mythology are male – described as having ugly faces and long beards – there are some stray mentions of female dwarfs, such as one of the titular characters in the Swedish ballad “Herr Peder och Dvärgens Dotter” (“Sir Peter and the Dwarf’s Daughter”).

Some sources identify the dwarfs as being the same race of beings as the black elves.
Elves

Having mentioned elves, it becomes easy to proceed to a discussion of this particular group of living beings.

There is some confusion about the “dark elves” since they seem to be described as living underground in the same way as dwarfs – or black elves – do.

There is likewise some difficulty in determining who or what the “light elves” really are, since there is such a strong connection between them and the Aesir that some scholars have guessed that they might actually be one and the same. Others think that the light elves might actually be the Vanir, and there seems to be some support for that theory in the association between the god Freyr and the light elves. The main idea seems to be that these particular elves stood in opposition to the giants, as the Aesir did.

As with the dwarfs, elves appear in the stories and sagas of Norse mythology, but to a greater or lesser degree depending on the tales themselves. Sometimes, they are merely used to set the scene for the hero, giving him a sign that he will be traveling into unknown lands or even into
different worlds entirely. At other times, the heroes are marked out as being special by having some degree of blood relationship to the elves, implying that their ancestors intermarried with these otherworldly beings.

Norns

Not quite goddesses, not quite giants or dwarfs, not quite human – the Norns are identified primarily as female beings, whose primary function is to foresee and govern the destinies of all living things, from the Aesir on down.

The Norns are not actually limited to the trio of Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld; there are many others, who are said to appear around a child when it is newly born, and foretell what that child’s destiny will be. Accordingly, some Norns are perceived to be benevolent, while others are malevolent.
The easiest way of understanding the primary Norns is to compare them to the Greek concept of the Fates: they spin the thread of a person’s life and measure the length of his or her life. Urd’s name corresponds to the past, Verandhi’s to the present, and Skuld’s to the future.

The primary Norns are depicted as women wrapped in all-concealing cloaks seated next to a holy well. Scattered around them are various lengths of thread and many other items associated with weaving, such as distaffs.

Skuld, in addition to her function as a Norn, is also often listed as one of the Valkyries.

**Dísir**

While the dísir are also said to be female spirits that govern the fates of individuals and of families, the primary difference seems to be that they may have been derived from the collective spirits of the family’s ancestors. They function as protective spirits, looking after the destinies of their descendants. Festivals were held to honor these spirits, at which sacrifices were made and prayers were said in order to invoke their favorable regard.
Valkyries

Already briefly mentioned as being associated with Odin, the familiar image of the Valkyrie is of a young woman wearing shining robes and armor, and carrying weapons such as swords, shields, and spears. They are said to appear around the edges of a battlefield and choose which fighters will live and which will die.

Then, they perform a further selection of those who die, taking the spirits of their chosen warriors to the hall that’s been reserved for them. The Valkyries also serve as cupbearers to these spirits.

In some of the heroic stories and sagas, the role of the hero’s lover is assigned to a Valkyrie – and she may either fight by his side on the field of battle, or give him her weapons and armor, or stay behind but offer him her guidance or counsel.

Depending on the depiction, a Valkyrie may often be accompanied by ravens (to denote her connection to Odin), horses, or swans.
Humans

According to material in the Poetic Edda, the first man was named “Ask” and the first woman was named Embla. Their names are derived from trees: “Ask” from the ash tree, and “Embla” from either the elm or a vine. The stories of their creation vary from account to account; some say that it was Odin, Hönir, and Lothur who gave them important gifts, while others say that the three gods involved were Odin and his brothers Vili and Vé.

Scholars still disagree on the right interpretation of the gifts that were given to these first humans, such as “soul”, “sense”, and “blood and goodly color”. What they do agree on is that the entire human race traces its descent from these two individuals, and that at least two of the Aesir were tasked with watching over them and protecting them: Odin, who participated in their creation or awakening; and Thor, who fights the giants on their behalf.

The fate of mankind during the upheaval and battles of Ragnarök is likewise embodied in one man and one woman, who are foretold to survive the end of the universe by hiding either in a sheltered wood or within the trunk of a tree. The woman’s name is said to be Líf, while the man’s is Lífthrasir.
Chapter 5
Heroes and Heroines

Humans are not without their great legends and heroic tales within the corpus of Norse mythology and in stories such as the Völsunga saga and the many exploits of the Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok, men and women struggle for their lives – sometimes against other humans, and sometimes against monstrous and terrible creatures – while various gods look on.

The theme that unites these sagas seems to be that it is a heroic thing to be aware of one’s own mortality and the limited time that one might have on earth – but never to let that grim knowledge overshadow one’s days.

Völsunga Saga

Volsung was the son of Rerir, born after his father’s death from a long and lingering illness. He inherited the martial prowess of his ancestors and
proved it by winning the hand of Hljod in marriage, taking her family, who were Jötnar, by surprise. Together, Volsung and Hljod raise a large family of eleven, of whom the eldest are the twins Sigmund and Signy.

When Signy is old enough to be married, she catches the eye of Siggeir, and they are soon wed – but at the wedding feast, Sigmund, Signy’s twin brother, unwittingly offends Siggeir. In retaliation, Siggeir imprisons not just Sigmund but all of his and Signy’s brothers. Siggeir also kills Volsung through treacherous means.

Sigmund and his brothers are placed in stocks out in the open, so that they may be devoured by wolves – but Signy defies her husband and finds a way for her twin brother to escape his captivity. He hides in a wood and Signy anonymously sends him assistance – and eventually, the two sons she bore to Siggeir with the intention that Sigmund should raise those sons and train them into warriors who will avenge Volsung. But the two boys fail Sigmund’s tests of bravery and have themselves killed.

Signy then disguises herself and goes to Sigmund’s lair and sleeps with him over the course of three nights before returning to the home of Siggeir. She becomes pregnant with Sigmund’s son, whom she names Sinfiotli. She hides the fact of his parentage from her son himself as well as from her husband and her brother.

Being a “pure” descendant of Volsung, Sinfiotli is the ideal candidate to avenge his grandfather and uncles, and Sigmund consents to train him to become a powerful warrior. They waited for their chance to attack – and when Signy gives them the signal, they take Siggeir and all the rest of his children by surprise. The children are put to the sword while Siggeir watches, and then Sigmund and Sinfiotli shut Siggeir up in his house and set it on fire.
In perfect silence, Signy stands by and allows them to slaughter the children, and to torch the house. And, as Siggeir dies, she speaks to Sigmund and Sinfiotli, telling them that they have succeeded in avenging the dead Volsung and his sons. Then she enters the burning house and dies at Siggeir’s side.

Sigmund returns to the country of his father and rules there for many years. In his old age, he married a woman named Hjordis. But the suitor that she rejected in Sigmund’s favor wages war against Sigmund, finally breaking his sword into shards and dealing him a mortal blow. As he lays dying, Sigmund asks Hjordis to safeguard the broken sword, and foretells that it will be reforged so that their unborn son might carry his father’s weapon.

Soon after Sigmund’s death, Hjordis gives birth to their son, Sigurd; they are taken in by the prince of a neighboring kingdom, and Sigurd grows to manhood there.

In searching for a horse that would take him on adventures, Sigurd enters a wood and encounters Odin himself; the god deems him worthy and brave, and bestows upon him the gift of the horse Grani, which is descended from Odin’s own steed Sleipnir.

Sigurd’s tutor and foster-father, Regin, tells him the story of Fafnir the dragon. Fafnir had been Regin’s brother, but he killed their father and amassed a hoard of cursed gold.

Regin tries to make a sword for his foster-son, but the blades break when Sigurd tests them. The third sword is forged out of the shards of Sigmund’s sword, and this time, Sigurd cleaves Regin’s iron anvil in half when he tests the blade.
Before setting out to kill Fafnir, Sigurd first avenges his father. Then, he travels to the country in which Fafnir is rumored to be residing and hatches a plan: he will dig a ditch and hide in it, and when Fafnir travels over that ditch, he will stab him with his sword, and hold fast so that the dragon’s body should be cut all the way down to his tail. Odin appears again and advises Sigurd to dig several ditches to catch Fafnir’s blood.

The plan is successful, but Fafnir curses Sigurd, saying that his hoard of gold and Regin will be the causes of Sigurd’s own death. Regin comes upon the scene and drinks Fafnir’s blood, then asks Sigurd to roast the heart of Fafnir so that Regin can eat it.

In testing whether the heart was cooked, Sigurd gets some of the dragon’s blood on his finger and licks it off – and the blood gives him the ability to understand the language of birds. By listening to a nearby flock, he learns that Regin is planning to kill him – so he eats the heart instead, then kills Regin. On leaving, he takes with him as much of the dragon’s gold as he can carry.

While riding aimlessly, he comes upon a strange ring of flames; he forces his horse through that ring and is surprised to come upon a sleeping maiden: the Valkyrie Brynhild, who has been cast out from Odin’s service. He wakes her up and she gives him her love, as well as teaches him how to navigate the shifting currents of society. She also shares with him her knowledge of magic. Sigurd promises to marry her when he returns from his adventures.

Sigurd makes his way to Gjuki and his queen, Grimhild, and they welcome and introduce him to their children: their sons Gunnar, Hogni, and Guttorm; and their daughter Gudrun. Grimhild wants Sigurd to marry Gudrun, so she
slips a magical potion into his drink – it caused him to forget all about Brynhild and the promises that he made to her. He takes Gudrun as his wife. Gunnar then asks Sigurd to help him win Brynhild as his wife – but Gunnar is not brave enough to ride through the flames. Another magical spell allows the two men to exchange shapes, and again, Sigurd breaks through the fire. He spends three nights with Brynhild, but this time, he puts his bare sword between them in the bed. Then, still wearing Gunnar’s form, he asks her to come away with him – and she does so, reluctantly, leaving behind a child named Aslaug, who is the daughter that she bore to Sigurd.

Thinking that Sigurd was unfaithful to her, Brynhild marries Gunnar, and there was peace for a short time in the household of Gjuki – peace enough for Sigurd and Gudrun to have a son. But then Brynhild and Gudrun have an argument over which of them has won the better husband – and in the process, the whole truth about Gunnar and Sigurd comes spilling out.

To take her revenge, Brynhild goes to her husband Gunnar and lies to him about Sigurd, saying that Sigurd had slept with her during the three nights that he spent with her, and that unless Gunnar kills Sigurd, she will leave him. Again, playing the coward, Gunnar convinces one of his brothers to kill Sigurd in his sleep – and that brother dies, too, when the mortally wounded Sigurd throws his sword and impales him.

Brynhild laughs as Gudrun weeps over her dead husband – then reveals the whole truth to a shocked Gunnar before foretelling his future and that of Gudrun. Then she kills herself. Gunnar, weeping, lays her body on the funeral pyre with Sigurd.
Ragnar Loðbrókar Saga

The immediate sequel to the Völsunga saga tells of Ragnar Lodbrok’s many adventures and explains his connection to Sigurd and Brynhild.

Born the son of Sigurd Hring (no relation to Sigurd of the Völsunga saga), Ragnar ascends to his father’s throne and becomes the ruler of a great northern kingdom.

But the kings of the surrounding regions believe Ragnar to be too young and too inexperienced to lead his people and hold his throne, so they send various armies against him, hoping to overthrow him and take his holdings for themselves.

Ragnar proves himself to be a formidable warrior even in his youth, and he personally leads his army against his enemies’ raids. He kills many great warriors and wins great fame throughout the land.
On hearing of the murder of his grandfather Siward, Ragnar rides to avenge him – and there he finds that the women of his grandfather’s household have been forced into prostitution. He throws himself into the battle to rescue them, and is aided by a force of skilled fighters – who are revealed to be those same abused women, dressed in men’s clothes and wielding men’s weapons. Chief among these fighters is the fierce and skilled Lagertha, and she impresses Ragnar so much that he courts her and wishes to make her his wife.

She tests him by setting a bear and a great hunting-hound to guard her home; Ragnar fights and kills them both, and wins Lagertha’s respect and heart. She bears him a son named Fridleif and two daughters.

Hearing of his king’s skill as a warrior, one of Ragnar’s own vassals asks him for help with killing a serpent. That vassal had set a young serpent as his beautiful daughter Thora’s guardian – and when it grew into its full size, it claimed the girl for itself, and ate anyone who tried to go near it and her. The vassal asked Ragnar to kill the serpent and promised to give him Thora’s hand in marriage if he succeeds.

Disguising himself in shaggy furs and clothes that had been treated with sand and tar, Ragnar takes up his weapons and sets out to do battle with the serpent. He spears the serpent through the heart and then cuts off his head, and as promised, takes Thora as his wife – but he has to divorce Lagertha in order to do so.

Lagertha eventually forgives him and marries another man – but when Ragnar is threatened by civil war, she sails to his rescue with 120 ships and a force of loyal warriors under her command. On returning to her home, Lagertha finds out that her new husband has been treacherous and untrue – so she kills him with a spearhead that was concealed in a pocket of her
gown and takes over his kingdom. She remains one of Ragnar’s allies until the end of his life.

For her part, Thora bears Ragnar two sons, named Agnar and Eric – but she dies of illness only a few years into the marriage.

After a period of mourning, Ragnar takes up the mantle of conqueror once again, ranging through unfamiliar lands. One day, his men become entranced by the beauty of a young woman who has just finished bathing – and they get so distracted that they allow the bread that they had been baking to burn. Ragnar asks them to explain themselves and they tell him about the girl, so he sends her a message that is also a riddle: she must appear to them, but she must “arrive neither dressed nor undressed, neither alone nor in company, and neither hungry nor full”.

She obliges him: when she arrives at the encampment, she is dressed in a net, biting down on an onion, with a dog trotting by her side. Ragnar becomes convinced that she is both beautiful and intelligent, and that’s when he learns her name: she was raised under the false name “Kráka”, but her real name is Aslaug – the daughter of the great hero Sigurd and the indomitable Valkyrie Brynhild.

Not only does Aslaug give Ragnar four more sons, she rides into battle, too. When Agnar and Eric, Ragnar’s sons by Thora, are captured and killed, she takes up the name “Randalin” and goes to avenge them. Her sons, Ivar the Boneless, Hvitserk, Ubbe, and Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye lead an armada of ships, while Aslaug/Randalin travels by land with an escort of 1,500 loyal warriors. After a long battle, Aslaug and her sons were victorious, having won their vengeance for their step-family.

Aslaug also knew some of the magic that her mother had taught to her father, and she used those spells to weave an enchanted shirt for Ragnar. He
wears it as part of his customary armor when he goes on subsequent raids, and it is only when his enemies tear it away from him that they are able to vanquish him, throwing him into a pit of snakes.
Chapter 6
The Nine Worlds

Anyone who takes a quick look at the stories of Norse mythology soon learns about the many places in which these tales are set – many places, that is, and many worlds. Characters might be told to journey through several worlds just to reach their destinations or learn that the great battle they are to take part in is in some other realm and not the one that they had been born in.

The Norsemen understood that the universe was divided into several realms or worlds, which were all connected by the great and holy ash tree named
Yggdrasil. Its branches span the entire breadth and width of the heavens, while its roots extend toward, and are nourished by three great sources of water.

Yggdrasil supports and connects the nine different home worlds of the various races and creatures found throughout Norse mythology. While the original names of these realms have been lost, modern research and reconstructions have provided us with the following list.

_Asgard_ is the home of the Aesir. They gather by one of the roots of Yggdrasil to pass judgments and confer among themselves. Urd’s Well is located here, as is the hall of the heroes, which is known as Valhalla. In order to reach Asgard, one must travel by the rainbow bridge Bifröst.

_Álfheimr_ is the home of the light elves.

_Niðavellir_, also known as _Svartalfheim_, is the home of the dark elves, who are also identified as dwarves.

_Midgard_ is the home of the humans, and the gods of the Aesir consider it to be under their protection.

_Jötunheimr_ is the home of the Jötnar. Its capital is Utgard. Mímir’s Well is located here.

_Vanaheimr_ is the home of the Vanir.

_Niflheim_ is a world of ice, cold, mist, and darkness. There are conflicting reports about this realm; in some stories Niflheim is the location of the world of the dead, which is named Hel, and is ruled over by the queen of the same name: Hel, the daughter of Loki. Other stories refer to Hel as _Helheimr_, a realm unto itself.

_Muspelheim_ is a world of fire, ash, and smoke. It is the home of many of the giants who will fight the gods at Ragnarök.
Norse paganism continues up to this day. It is proof that people from Northern Europe have high regard for their religion and mythology. In fact, Icelanders have erected a shrine for their principal gods – Odin, Thor, and Frigg – a practice that was prevalent in the time of the Vikings.

In Iceland, there is an association called Asatruarfelagio, which advocates the worship of Norse deities, although its priest Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson doesn’t believe that Odin, the one-eyed god, exists. Therefore, the belief in the gods and the building of the shrine is simply a preservation of their cultural heritage, as the myths are the results of the collective unconscious, man’s response to nature and his environment, and the workings of his genius. Still, there are 2,400 members of Asatruarfelagio in Iceland.

Meanwhile, the temple has a dome and the structure is circular, similar to the Roman coliseums and the shrines of days old. The temple in Iceland is built on a hill that overlooks the country’s capital. The temple also doubled as an assembly hall for funerals and weddings and other religious activities. As for the neo-pagans in the country, they still do celebrate, albeit partially, certain holidays by killing and sacrificing animals, drinking, eating, reading, and merrymaking.

Strangely, Scandinavians and Icelandic people treated religion as part of their life. They didn’t just worship their gods in temples, but they also did so in the comfort of their homes. During the era of the Vikings, when the latter sacked other regions, they conducted their worships outdoors. Traders
and seafarers from Sweden – the Geats – left their sacrifices or conducted rituals under a giant oak tree as an act of gratitude for a successful and safe travel.

In the Norse sagas, there is the story of a temple that was built at the foot of a holy mountain. This temple was dedicated to Thor. However, there were no historical accounts that could prove the existence of such temple.

The description of the temple is exemplary and vivid, though. It is tall with a pedestal on the floor. This pedestal was where the religious put an arm ring for the oath, a bowl for blood and sacrifices, and their idols.

In yet another saga, the Vatnsdaela, an old man chose the valley of Vatnsdalur to build him home. Consequently he also built a huge temple on the same site where he found his amulet of Freyr, which has long been missing. It is obvious that in the sagas, the building of temples is linked to divine intervention and miracles (as in finding the missing amulet). Fast forward to the dawn of the 20th century, archaeologists unearthed ruins of temples at Haukadalur.

In the Egils saga, on the other hand, the author described a gruesome event in a temple in Norway. After the feast, while men were drinking, one man killed another. The kingdom proclaimed the murderer an outlaw, because of the crime and because he defiled the temple.

It’s easy to look for a pattern in Norse paganism and worship. Norsemen apparently built small shrines for them to personally conduct their worships. Like in most temples, the faithful could keep and leave an arm ring for his oaths and a small bowl for his sacrifice. This shrine may be built outside, under a tree or beside a stone or mound (as long as the shrine is surrounded by nature).
The Norsemen took their worships seriously, to the extent of creating laws for worship. For example, the faithful should keep a silver arm ring that weighed two ounces or more. The chieftain had to wear the arm ring during the assemblies. Moreover, he had to smear or redden the arm ring with the blood of the sacrificed animal. If one had to ask for favors, he had to swear before the ring and invoke a god, usually the main gods of Norse religion. The pagans were also made to pay taxes for the temple. As expected, there were punishments for those who defiled the shrines.

Even during the rise of Christianity in Norway, some Norsemen did not stop from worshipping their gods despite the laws forbidding it. In Fjord, Norway, people especially farmers “fed” their silver and gold idols of the gods.

Ibn Fadlaan also wrote about Norse worship in 921. Traders who just docked also carried with them perishable goods such as milk, bread, onions, liquor, and meat, apparently sacrifices for their gods. Meanwhile, Icelandic faithful lay prostrated before their idols. It’s important that they do this on the ground, closer to nature (Note that gods also manifested themselves in natural phenomena).

Archaeologists for their part have also unearthed gold foil, about three-eighth of an inch, with an illustration of a man and a woman embracing each other. In some parts of Iceland, the gold foils contained writings (perhaps prayers) that invoked landvaettir or land spirits. These land spirits were believed to protect people from famine and blessed farmers with good soil and a bountiful harvest. Norsemen likewise believed that the land spirits were the first inhabitants of the land and thus it was customary to pay respects to them.
Another feature of Norse paganism especially prevalent in Icelandic literature is the appearance of the volva, a female seer who predicted the destinies of children. To obtain the knowledge of the volva, there must be a special rite conducted. If done right, the volva would then chant spells. Worshippers would prepare a high seat for the volva and gave her food offerings.

Norsemen truly believed that the way to be favored by the gods is to be close to them as much as possible. Since this wasn’t physically possible, the believers frequented the places sacred to the gods. They also had a toast to the gods and still made sacrifices and offerings (mostly food now) so they would in return be bestowed with protection, luck, good harvest, a successful travel, and fertility. Warriors and king sought divine intervention from the chief god, Odin. Families turned to Freyr. Women prayed to Freya, while travelers worshipped Thor.

Unlike Christianity, the laws governing Norse religions are anchored on shame and honor; a believer was punished if he had wronged the gods in a particular way, such as making the wrong sacrifices, or forgetting a ritual.

Norse paganism also considers luck as an important part of life. While Christian teachings say that everything happens for a reason, and that you have been given free will, Norsemen were taught that luck is needed for you to survive. Essentially this luck also comes from divine favors. Thus, Norsemen could choose the god they would worship if the said god gave the believer some luck. If, however, the believer thought he was unlucky, he could worship another god.

Norsemen also thought that the power to see the future and make predictions was a gift from the gods – and a prophetess was considered lucky in Norse religion. The prophetess looked like how seers looked in
most European literature – wearing a long cloak, with accessories on her head, carrying a staff and a pouch filled with magical stones, runes, and herbs.

Some women weren’t so lucky, but they chose to perform a great deed, this time to be buried with their king. A concubine who would be willing to be sacrificed was said to help the king enter Valhalla, the hall of the slain heroes and warriors. This concubine would make the announcement of her sacrifice, and she would be under watchful protection for days. She would be given food and drinks, all to make her happy before the dreaded sacrifice. Before the day of the burial, the concubine would sleep with the king’s men and warriors. She would do the same on the day of the burial, in the burial ship along with the king and his treasures, where she would later be strangled and stabbed and left to burn with the ship.

**How the Nordic People Interacted with the Gods**

Like in other cultures, the Norsemen interacted with gods through dreams and consulting oracles or more specifically, runes.
Odin was known to have two ravens on his shoulder, which became his eyes to the world. The supreme god also “communicated” to people in poetry, prophecy, and music. Other gods like to reveal their emotions and messages in natural forms, such as thunderstorms. When thunder roars, or when the earth is suddenly blessed with heavy rain, the Norse take it as a response from Thor, the god of thunder.

When the sun shines, however, it is often interpreted that Baldr, the god of radiance, is at work. Like the sibyl and other gifted mortals, Baldr dreams of events about to happen, including his eventual death.

Apart from interpreting the weather and other natural occurrences, and experiencing prophetic dreams, the Norse recorded the messages from gods
through poems and other documents. The believers prayed for rain, abundance, a child or a lover, and wisdom, and these were blessed by the gods. These accounts are now revealed in the Icelandic Sagas, Poetic Edda, Prose Edda, and the Scaldic poems.
Chapter 8
The Norse Rituals

One of the rituals that highly characterize the Norse religion is runecraft. Pagans would inscribe their prayers and songs for the gods in runes. Sometimes these runes are read, colored, and interpreted, and even used to predict the future. The major theme in Norse rituals is divided into three words: bithja (ask), blota (sacrifice), and senda (send). These words already give modern scholars of Norse mythology an image of how the ancient Norse people prayed and asked for blessings. There is an invocation involved – a call or supplication to the god. There is an offering to be made, which could be food, animal, or in some clans, blood of humans. Then there is a sending of the message to the gods. In some cultures, the smoke that rises from the fire and reaches the heavens is a way to send the prayer and the sacrifice to the gods. If the gods are connected to the earth, such as the god of the harvest, the blood is sprinkled into the earth for the god’s “consumption”.

There are other rituals practiced by the Norse. The most typical is the prayer, the fastest and easiest way to communicate to deities. The prayer of Sigdrifa, for example, is a prayer to Thor. Sigdrifa is a Valkyrie who encounters the Norse hero Sigurd and thus says this prayer: Hail Aesir! Goodly spells and speech bespeak we from you.

In this prayer, Sigdrifa salutes the god and invokes Thor. She also called upon the powers of Day and Night, as well as that of Earth. The gods answered her salutation and prayer by bestowing the Valkyrie skills in
magic and talent in speech. Meanwhile, such prayers to the god of thunder were preserved and recorded by the poet Snorri.

It is important for whoever was asking for favor to salute the god lest the god is angered. There are descriptive epithets used to greet the deity, followed by the god’s other titles. Some prayers even describe the god’s weapon or tool, which is oftentimes the right tool for the request to be heeded (i.e. Thor’s hammer). The supplicant then summarizes the problem that needs to be addressed.

Norse gods can also be invoked through the repetition of their names and epithets as well as reference to what these gods did. Sometimes, however, prayers aren’t enough and offerings are being demanded from the supplicant. These offerings often demanded for blood and life, and though this heathen worship is shunned in today’s tradition, it proved to be effective and significant in the ancient times.

People offered food, flowers, and fruits, too. These are often shared in a feast. In terms of animal offerings, the animal is boiled and partitioned, and everyone eats a part of the animal. The animal’s blood, on the other hand, is sprinkled in the shrine. Norse believers had to participate in the feasts as a way of showing their reverence for the gods. These feasts are not celebrated on just any other day; there has to be a special event that commemorates the feast. Examples are weddings and funerals. In some cases even the king is offered to the gods (though he is not eaten by his followers). As for animals, only healthy animals were offered. Similarly, only aromatic herbs and fragrant and fresh flowers were offered.
Aside from the worship of deities, the Norse and the Vikings also honored the ancestors. They liked to communicate to supernatural beings. Women in particular practiced divination and spell-casting. They often used tools and weapons of warriors, or inscribed runes on these weapons so that certain attributes would then be “transferred” to the warriors. For instance, the Norse prayed for courage and success in war. These words would be inscribed in the tools, and the women would bless them with offerings and an invocation of the gods. Sacrifices of animals that embody strength and power, such as stallions and boars, were also deemed fit during festivals.

Adam of Bremen in 1075 further described these rituals: there had to be male sacrifices, either a person or an animal; there should be nine heads and four of these offerings should be special or sacred to the deities they were
sacrificed to. More important, the offerings are hung in a sacred grove near the temple.

These religious rites were said to have been performed by a local ruler or a priest. There is also feasting after the offering was done, and the people recited toasts to the deities. It was customary to perform the rituals. If a person refused, he would be driven away from the clan. Even leaders and kings were mandated to participate in the religious rituals.

Most of these rituals were conducted in natural places such as burial mounds, groves, and hills. There were reports of runes, weapons, and magical tools found in cemeteries.

**Various Norse Rituals**

The Norse conduct rituals on days that are special to the gods they revere. Seasons likewise dictate what kind of ritual is to be done. In late October,
for instance, the Norse honor their ancestors and dead relatives in the Dieses or Winter Nights. Dieses is related to the Disir, spirits that guide the living while they are still on earth (Midgard). The Norse also had their celebration of Yuletide, which they celebrate in December. The Norse exchanged gifts and hanged wreaths and evergreens, and participated in symbols to make their vows. Symbols are the so-called drinking rites of the Norse.

In February, however, the Norse have their Disting rituals. They have their tools and objects blessed as well as thank the gods in preparation for their new projects (a symbolic take on new beginnings). This ritual is apparently done to honor and give thanks for the milk produced by ewes. The Norse also had their version of May Day – Walburgis – wherein the Norse erected a Maypole in a grove. They hung ribbons on the pole and danced around it. This ritual is often done to ask for fertility, whether for plants, animals, or humans. In contrast, Gleichennacht is a ritual celebrated during Spring Equinox. The Norse honored Nerthus, the earth goddess, in the rite.

If there is a ritual for the Spring Equinox, there is also a Norse ritual for the Summer Solstice. Like the Maitag, this ritual centers on love and fertility, only this time the people danced around a bonfire. The Norse also believed it was just right to be thankful for a year of harvest. They baked bread and offered it during Thingstide. Aside from this offering, the people competed and participated in games.

Lastly, the Norse celebrated Gleichtentag, which falls during Fall Equinox. People shared food and drink with one another and boasted, in a good way, their achievements. Note that it was customary for Northern Europeans like the Norse to talk of their accomplishments with their fellowmen.

Seidh
The Norse practiced various kinds of practice, especially those that are magical in nature. The term seidh originated from the ritual of the Norse to boil salt, which also happens to be a purification rite. Though women practice prophecy, men are equally capable. The Norse male practitioner is called the vitki. Being skilled in seidh is considered important in the Norse community, as seidh is Odin’s specialty as well. With seidh, Norse sorcerers could shapeshift (or so they claim), send nightmares to people, conjure love spells and make women fertile, and raise storms.

Rewards and Punishment

A lot has to be said about rewards and punishment in traditional Norse Culture. If you lived in Asgard or even in Midgard, you can never be sure of what you did wrong. Gods are complicated – hard to please and trust. They may be wise, strong, and forgiving, but they can also hold grudges. In this context, Loki the god of mischief, becomes the best example. Apparently, the origin of unlucky number 13 started in this mythology. When Loki was not invited to a feast, he appeared still in the feast and killed all the 12 gods. It turned out that Loki was the 13th god. Since then, the number 13 has been associated with misfortune. That said, it made the Norse wary of Loki’s number, as well as insulting the god.

Another complex concept in Norse religion is the fact that one had to kill to create something else. Long ago, Odin and his brothers murdered Ymir, a being, so they could create the universe and the earth. This story also signifies what you should do to be favored: sacrifice either yourself or someone dear to you (see Offerings).

This idea of sacrifice is rewarded by something great, however, such as when Odin gave up his eye so he could gain knowledge. He became obsessed with hoarding knowledge that he had chosen to be blind. Another
episode narrates how Odin had to stab himself with a spear just so he could learn how to read and write runes. Truly, there is a price for everything.

Angry deities also collectively mete out justice, as what happened to Loki when he was bound using his own son’s intestines. Loki became bound and was told to wait until the end of the world.

The gods aren’t always fighting and punishing mortals and other gods. Sometimes they appear to men to help them. Hadding was a king of Denmark, albeit fictional, and was guided by Odin during his quest to regain his father’s kingdom. Although Hadding was able to regain the kingdom (his reward for being loyal to Odin), he also sacrificed himself in the end.

This is not to say that Odin does not reward the good or those faithful to him. The Norse myths say that Odin will welcome those valiant Norsemen to Valhalla, or the Hall of the Fallen. Apparently, this is a place for the dead, but more specifically to dead but brave warriors. Odin welcomes these souls and keeps them in Valhalla until doomsday (Ragnarok). In Valhalla the souls of the warriors sit together and drink mead with Odin. The image of Valhalla is explored in Snorri.

The Norse believed in the concept of meting out punishments and rewards. In this system, good deeds are rewarded with a special seat with the gods, whereas evildoings are punished in equal measure as well. There may be instances in which gods don’t play well, especially if Loki is involved, and that gods demand greater sacrifices from their followers.
And why do we still remember the tales of the Aesir today? Why do we still know what the word *Ragnarök* means? Why do we continue to study the sagas and the *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas*?

As familiar as Thor and Odin and Loki and all the others – like dwarves and elves – are to us today, their stories and the greater mythology that formed the backdrop and bedrock of their adventures lay unknown to the world at large until the 19th century. Norse mythology was “confined” to Scandinavian culture for all those years, and part of the reason for that is the coming of Christianity to those northern countries and cultures. The various religious orders searched for converts, and at the same time, sought to impose their ideas of monotheism on those same converts. As a consequence, the skalds resorted to rewriting the myths, trying to find tenuous connections between Norse heroes and the familiar names out of Greek and Roman mythology – linking the ancestors of the Vikings to the Trojans, for example.

For a while, the skalds disappeared into the ranks of the religious orders, and the stories that they told languished in obscurity – but by the 19th century, enough scholars had stoked interest in those verses. Indeed, modern popular culture owes much of its familiarity with the characters of Norse mythology to the translations of the sagas that began to arise at that time, as well as to the great cycle of operas written by Richard Wagner: *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. From these spectacles, we became familiar with idioms such as “It ain’t over ’til the fat lady sings”: a direct reference to the
final aria of the final opera in the cycle, which is sung by the Valkyrie Brynhild. In this case, the Valkyrie is referred to as the fat lady because the great sopranos of the time were almost all of the same body type: top-heavy and overweight.

From Wagner, we learned to refer to Odin as Wotan, to Thor as Donner, and to Loki as Loge – and the immense popularity of those operas, which in fact are still being performed in the present day, spurred public interest in those gods’ exploits. Initially presented as examples of Germanic paganism, people were soon able to realize that these stories were Norse in nature.

The Norse myths and legends continued to be an important influence on various artists. Authors such as H. Rider Haggard tried to write epic adventures styled on the Völsunga saga, for example, while others such as G. K. Chesterton emphasized the pagan – and therefore “evil” – aspects of the myths as a foil to Christian stories and adventures.

But it’s perhaps in the related areas of fantasy and science fiction that the stories of Norse mythology have had the greatest influence, especially when we think of a story of a golden ring with some kind of magical property. This ring is sought after by various factions, who have all been tricked into believing that possessing this trinket will help them save their people or their kingdoms – but unknown to all of them, the ring is cursed and is trying to get back to the being who crafted it.

While the previous paragraph does describe the basic plot of J. R. R. Tolkien’s masterpiece The Lord of the Rings, it was heavily based on, and influenced by, Norse mythology by way of Der Ring des Nibelungen. The cursed ring is a major plot item in the Völsunga saga – which also mentions a sword that was broken and reforged. In Norse mythology, these items are
Andvaranaut (the ring) and Gram (the sword); in *The Lord of the Rings*, they are recast as the One Ring and Narsil / Andúril.

Tolkien’s story has left its mark on literature and on popular culture, and through the lens of those three books, we now have our own ideas of dwarves who create great objects with metal and stone, elves who possess supernatural beauty and peerless martial prowess, and trolls that turn into stone when exposed to sunlight. We also owe many depictions of warrior women to the Valkyries, and to the Norse concept of the shieldmaiden, whom Tolkien showcased in his book through the character of Êowyn.

From fantasy and science fiction to superheroes is only a quick step sideways, and the popular images of dark-haired Loki, blond and beardless Thor, and all of the other members of the Aesir come to us from the fertile mind of Stan Lee – who brought these gods and monsters to the “funny pages”. We then saw those characters on the big screen as important parts of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Those images became so influential that it was a surprise to see *red-haired* and *bearded* Thor in a storyline from the Vertigo Comics, entitled, *The Sandman* written by Neil Gaiman.

Speaking of Gaiman, various versions of the Aesir make important appearances across his corpus of work: Odin and Loki are primary characters in the novel *American Gods* – whose television adaptation will be airing in 2017. In addition, the author has penned his own book of retellings of the Norse myths.

Fans of “*A Song of Ice and Fire*” by George R. R. Martin and its live-action adaptation *Game of Thrones* will find it easy to understand the Norse influence on the Ironborn faction of reavers and raiders, and in particular on the excellent seamanship of the members of the House Greyjoy.
The stories of the Aesir and the Vanir and of so many other strange beings and creatures were once confined to Scandinavia – but now they have even made their way across the globe to become the basis of a Korean Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (known as Ragnarok Online). Influences from Norse mythology can be seen in the series of Final Fantasy video games from Japan, as well as in various animated stories and comics.

Speaking of Norse mythology on television, there is, of course, the historical drama simply known as Vikings, which airs on the History Channel. The stories are based on the exploits of Ragnar Lodbrok, as told in Ragnars saga Loðbrókar and in other poems and songs. Four seasons have been produced, and it has been announced that there will be a fifth.

The legends of Norse mythology had a musical component right at the beginning with many tales being sung or performed with instrumental accompaniment – and then they were revived on the grand scale in opera form. So, it’s no surprise that those same stories have become a primary influence on several genres of music, especially on heavy metal and its related genres – including Viking metal. Bands such as Manowar have turned to the sagas for source material for their albums, and use Viking imagery in their logos and stage design.

The Norse myths and legends have become firmly entrenched in popular culture and continue to be depicted through many forms of artistic expression.
Conclusion

Thank you again for taking the time to read this book!

Now that you know about the most prominent stories and legends that are part of Norse mythology, perhaps it will be easier for you to understand the various modern interpretations of these stories. I also hope that you’ll be able to better enjoy the various pop-culture versions of the gods, monsters, heroes, and heroines that you’ve met in the pages of this book.

If you want to learn more about Norse mythology, several in-depth texts can easily be found on the Internet. You can also check out the resources in your local library. Also, if you have any questions or comments for me regarding this book please feel free to contact me at helpfulbookideas@gmail.com.

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