

**Source of the Primeval Giant:
Recreating the Mimir Myth
by Timothy J. Stephany**
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Abstract:

The giant Mimir/Mim might be equated with Brimir, who himself is seemingly identical with Ymir. The giants Ymir, Mimir and perhaps even Hymir would then be variants on the primal giant, the first mortal being, and the first forger of swords. Then killed so as to form the world he became king of the underworld where he drinks mead and sits under a tree, which recalls both the Moon and the night sky. That the giants of Creation and of the Soma are distinct in Indian tradition suggests that if Mimir/Mim and Ymir/Brimir were identical it must have been well before the Odinic and Indian traditions split. The myth of Mimir, which has not survived as a single work in Norse myth, can be suggested from bits and pieces and from matters relating to the primal giant. An illustrative recreation of the myth can be generated to show how the story as told could have eventually led to its subsequent forms known today.

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Introduction

There are fine references to the origins of the Germanic people, and more widely the Indo-Europeans, that are contained within the mythology and records. These can be summarized from the sources in *Figure 1* below:

**Figure 1.
Primeval Giant and the origins of mankind**

Norse (Eddas)	Gauls (Caesar)	Indians (Vedas)	Germans (Tacitus)	Thorric ¹ (Eddas)
			Earth	lord
Ymir	Dis Pater	Self-born One	Tuisto	Thor
son		Manu	Mannus	(Magni)
frost-giants ²	Gauls	mankind	Germans	

Ymir, who appears in both Eddas, is often equated with Brimir of the *Poetic Edda*, known for his beer hall and his sword in Odin's possession.³ Details of a giant in the underworld with his beer hall might also be enough to link Brimir with Mimir, who drinks mead from a well, and if the giant Mimir can be equated with Mimir the sword maker⁴ these two might be two forms of the same primal giant. Thus these three arise from variations within the Odinic tradition, since each is most closely associated with Odin.

¹ The Tyrpic tradition might also fit in here, since apparently Tyr's father was Hymir (Ymir?) and his mother was an unnamed goddess (Gefion?). (As god of thunderstorms Tyr was certainly connected to bulls or oxen, as were Hymir and Gefion.)

² Often it has been supposed that Snorri amalgamated the reference to the man and woman from Ymir's arm pit with the son begotten by his legs, thus both giants and mankind (and dwarfs) may have come from Ymir initially.

³ Ymir is mentioned twice in the *Poetic Edda* as the source of the earth and he forms the basis for the primary telling in Snorri's *Edda*. The mention of Brimir being used to produce the dwarfs equates better with Purusa in the *Rig Veda*, whose body was used to form the classes of mankind (although this may have been a later addition to the Veda in order to solidify emergent class distinctions).

⁴ The master smith who made incredible swords with special powers was Mimir in *Thidriks-saga*, Miming in Saxo, and Mime the old in the German hero-saga *Biterolf* (MacCulloch 1964: 169). Snorri includes the sword name Miming among his list of swords (Sturluson 1987: 159).

If Brimir is not identical with Ymir then their characteristics and roles were intermingled or confused at some point and are hard to parse, but especially because so little is known about Brimir. Another giant to consider is Hymir, who himself owns a large cauldron that is retrieved by Thor and Tyr, and also Gymir. If these are each variations on the same primordial giant it might be supposed that different tribal groups or nations had their own variants of these myths.

In these cases the giant himself was the initial being of the universe. To associate the details together this giant was the first mortal being and the first forger of swords.⁵ Then he was killed so as to form the world, and so became king of the underworld where he drinks his mead and sits under a tree, which explains both the Moon and the night sky. Ymir in the Eddas is said to have been killed by Odin and his brothers, Mim is beheaded by Odin, and Hymir is killed by Thor (in both versions).

Can it really be that Ymir, Brimir, and Mimir were in three distinct variants on the creation myth? That Ymir is equivalent to Yama or Purusa and that the Mimir myth is equivalent to that of Dadhyanc means that these two stories were separate for a time before the Odinic and Indian traditions split. Also, there is no specific reason to believe in Norse myth that the giant Ymir/Brimir is the same as the giant Mimir/Mim, so if they were equivalent it must have been at an early time.

Ymir appears as the first being, who spawned the race of giants, while Mimir is associated with the Moon and the drink of inspiration there (later, the source to understanding the runes). Ymir has no associations with the Moon and Mimir has no associations with the origins of the giants (or mankind). This is also supported by Odin holding Brimir's (Ymir's) sword when decapitating Mimir, but not if one equates the giant Mimir with the smith Mimir (thus with Brimir) and the beer hall with the well of mead. The giant Vafthrudnir, who is also equivalent to

⁵ From the Vanaric tradition comes the giant Surt with his shining sword.

Mimir, is referred to by Odin as “first among the wise Powers” (Larrington 1999: 44) which suggests equivalence to Ymir.

Mim and Mimir⁶

Thus there is some reason to suppose that there was at least a story if not a myth of the giant of the Moon who was killed by the god Odin. The story of Mimir is more thoroughly attributed, but even so it is the story relating to the Mead of Poetry that is the only surviving narrative account in Germanic myth. The Mimir myth might only be re-formed from details in the Eddas and assumptions made about the role of the primal giant.

Originally the sacred mead was a drink of the gods, only later perhaps associated with alcohol and thus the fermentation deity Kvasir. Odin retrieved the Mead from Mimir and was responsible for his death. Thus in the original myth Mimir would have filled the same role as Ymir, and so would have existed as the primal giant of the Moon, with Odin then as the Sun. However, there is less reason to link Ymir/Brimir with the Moon specifically.⁷ Within the “orthodox” Odinic tradition it appears that the vault of the sky was viewed to be this primal giant’s skull, which is also inconsistent with the Mimir story. However, variations among the “Drink of the Gods” stories reveal how far details diverged from the original pre-Iron Age mythical explanation.

⁶ Snorri clearly prefers Mimir to Mim, only mentioning Mim when used within quotations as “Odin’s friend”. Brimir is mentioned twice by him, once as the name of a hall which later he calls Brimir’s hall or beer hall (Sturluson 1987: 65).

⁷ As Mim appears identical to Im, this could either mean that since Im had a father that he could not possibly be the primal giant (unless this detail was a late development), or that Im is equivalent to Ym(ir).

There is also the matter of Mimir's presumed descent from his father Midvitnir, which would create a paradox, unless this was a later addition. This would especially be plausible if there arose the need for an adjustment of the mythology when fermentation was discovered. In this way the mead was first related to Kvasir, who gave rise to fermentation, but it was then taken by Mim's (Im's) father. In the Indian tradition Kvasir is Tvastr, who is Indra's father.⁸ Kvasir holds no familial relation to Odin, but divergence merely reveals the myth would have been general rather than specific when it diverged.

Then there is the difference between Odin sacrificing his eye to Mimir, thus making the Moon round, and with Odin rather beheading the giant (in the Eddic myth "Vafthrudnir's Sayings"). The difference in these two variants could be one with Mimir wherein Odin sacrifices his eye and one with Mim wherein Odin beheads him (since in the Eddas the name Mim only refers to the head)⁹. Thus the basic structure of each would have been:

Mimir the giant rises out of the primal mass

He drinks from the well, the Moon

He develops the art of the smith

Odin, the Sun, travels there

Odin challenges him to a contest

Takes a drink from the well of inspiration

Mimir is seen drinking from his horn

Two variations of this were then incorporated into each Edda with one other transmitted to the *Rig Veda*. The Mimir and Mim variants, both within the Odinic tradition, are thus much closer

⁸ Fermentation by creating bubbles relates it to the air and thus directly to the sky god.

⁹ This would also fit with the myth "Vafthrudnir's Sayings" where the giant is named Im (Mim).

than either is to the Indian. The Mead of Poetry is itself further removed from these three, with the exception of its mention of Kvasir (Tvastr) and the eagle.

Beyond this are Urd and his well (Sturluson 1987: 121), which also is related to Mim but not directly with Odin and so must represent a close variant within a separate tradition. This means there were three close Odinic variants within Europe, one Indian tradition, and one other that might have come from another tradition (perhaps another Odinic variant).

Finally, there is the most unusual reference in “Skirnir’s Journey” when Gerd is informed of the arrival of Skirnir she says:

‘Tell him to come in into our hall
and drink the famous mead;
though I am afraid that out there may be
my brother’s slayer.
(Larrington 1999: 64)

And later at the end of his list of threats she says:

‘Be welcome now, lad, and receive the crystal cup,
full of ancient mead;
though I had never thought that I should ever love
one of the Vanir well.’
(Larrington 1999: 67)

How Gerd came by this mead, which is clearly the mead of inspiration, is not clear from this myth. As the myth is the only pure Vanaric myth, it gives us the clue that certain aspects of the

parent mythology found their way into the expression of this story. Even if this was later embellished with details, it escapes expectations to see the mead included here. If it is not a later addition the myth about Freyr and Gerd (Gerth, i.e. Bertha) is perhaps related to the Mimir myth, but in this case through the giant Gymir (Bymir, i.e. Brimir). If these associations are valid, then the goddess Bertha was also thought to descend directly from the primal giant. However, sufficient details are lacking to create any reliable conclusions pertaining to structures within the Vanaric tradition.

Rebuilt Myth of Mimir the Giant

It is not likely that these stories were ever combined into a unified myth and perhaps neither was ever told in any verse form. The construction that follows combines elements from both the Mim and the Mimir stories. The Mim story apparently followed the course of Odin having beheaded the giant and the Mimir story that had Odin sacrificing his eye. The giant may well have been killed by Odin in either case, especially if he is equivalent to Ymir. Here the evidence is used to put forth Mimir as a once primal giant.

Although the specific details are open to wide variation, some embellishment of the basic sequence is possible. It at least illustrates a form which could have provided material for the poems and mythology that followed (from which it has been constructed).

There was One who existed at the Beginning

When worlds were crossed between nature and void

When the cauldron pooled and flames were cooled

*And bubbling breath hissed from fire-scorched ice
Uprising fumaroles of steam, then deep Mimir arose
A yawning mild chasm was thus so formed
Long time did he consider his awakening there
The first man to breathe and taste the pure air
He sat and pondered long to gather his meaning
To the well's edge he went to taste its wise waters
Now awakened to know and to form a great sword
First gold, then silver, then hot bronze he poured
From raw iron he labored with hammer and tongs
To forge this molten metal into masterful form
Holding his great sword Mimung now made aloft
With a drinking cup formed from Audhumla's horn
He guarded that well of inspiration from the rest
Keeping the secret of the runes and way of the smith*

*One brother of three sought wisdom to be gained
Upon Winter's Way was Odin's wandering track
To take him to Mim's hall, beneath the tree's vault
Odin approached and asked deep Mim for a draught
But no drink would come from that well unless
He would give one eye in exchange for this gift
To possess such a secret as no other could know
His eye would be a suitable price to bestow
So this he gave for as much as he might quaff
Then given to bluster, to prove his new stuff*

*Proposed to the giant a contest to partake in
To wager head to head and it was undertaken
What wisdom is seen when two men are drunk
From mead they poured into that shapely long cup
But in that contest Bor's boy made out best
And with one swift swing of Brimir's stiff blade
Cast off the head of that wise giant that day
Now the surest among the living Odin was now
Standing over that blue body and red severed neck
Then did that head filled with untold wisdom speak
Frigg's man took that corpse to the deep chasm's edge
And filled it so upon it all things could be made
Mim's head was placed within that deep well of his
It still can be seen when the Moon lies unhid
Beneath his tree and within his treasure-flung lake
With his drinking horn tipped from its waters to take*

Conclusion

The giant Mimir is identical with Mim and also might be further equated with Brimir, who himself is identical with Ymir. The giants Ymir, Mimir and perhaps even Hymir would then be variants on the primal giant, the first mortal being, and the first forger of swords. Then killed so as to form the world, and so became king of the underworld where he drinks his mead and sits

under a tree, which recalls both the Moon and the night sky. Thus the Mimir myth explains the heavens, with Odin as the god of the Sun and underworld.

The evidence that links Ymir with Mimir goes through Brimir, who is perhaps more like Mimir through description but equivalent to Ymir in mythology. That the giants of Creation and the Soma are distinct in Indian tradition suggests that if Mimir/Mim and Ymir/Brimir were identical must have been long before the Odinic and Indian traditions split.

The myth of Mimir that has not survived as a single work in Norse myth can be recreated from bits and pieces and from matters relating to the primal giant. An illustrative recreation of the myth can be generated to show how the story as originally told could have eventually led to its subsequent form today.

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