

High Gods of the Northland
BOOK II: MYTHS

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The universe of myth consists of three worlds, one below the other: Asgard (heaven), Midgard (earth) and Hel (underworld). Midgard is surrounded by the sea, on the far side of which there is a forest Myrkwood (dark-wood).

Giantland (Iotunheim) is sometimes said to lie to the east and sometimes to the north, divided off by the ocean-sea or the river of ill-repute. In relation to its location it seems to have been equated with Niflheim, as Niflheim is itself equated with Hel. This might have arisen from confusions between which character was considered a giant or troll, spirit or demon, as well as the mixing of different traditions. (The Indian Yama or Iranian Yima was the first mortal to go to the underworld, and himself is equivalent to the giant Ymir.) Giantland is also sometimes equated with Utgard. Utgard (outer world) appears to have been the region of darkness beyond the edge of the sky, where demons or trolls were supposed to live. It could only be arrived at by crossing the sea. As it says in Saxo:

This vessel carried them to a sunless region, a land that knew neither stars nor the light of day but was shrouded in everlasting night. After they had sailed under this strange firmament for some time, their wood ran out, so that they had no fuel for their braziers.

In some traditions this troll-realm might have been an eternal region that existed before the world was created, although the layering of traditions makes the picture unclear.

Giants can be separated into two classes, the first being the creation giants who possess great knowledge, the second are the hill or mountain giants who are described as incredibly tall but rather dim, who use stone tools and flint, wear simple leather garments, sometimes possess herds, and often live in caves. Giants were typically held responsible for the formation of the land, as is sometimes ascribed to the gods. Giants are sometimes turned into stones when struck with sunlight, explaining the existence of isolated boulders on the landscape. The fire giant Surt and the frost giant Hrym are likewise forces of the dynamic earth.

The myths that follow are presented in a manner that attempts to place what are supposed to be the earlier narrative myths first, followed by later narrative myths, and then following this are the dialogue myths. They have been edited only so that they might be separated into distinct tales in an attempt to recover a more original version. Where the rare lacuna occurs reconstructions have been inserted.

Midgard Serpent

Snorri, for consistency, adds here that the serpent was likely not killed but survived to return again at Ragnarok. Also, that when Thor missed the serpent, he blamed Hymir and killed him.

Hrungnir

From its description the 'Hrungnir's heart' symbol seems to be a particular shape that sometimes appears carved on rocks. It looks like a triangle with a bite taken out of each side.

Hrungnir is elsewhere referred to as "thief of Thrud" that is often taken to mean that he originally had abducted the daughter of Thor and that this was the source of the contention.

Each of the myths as told by Snorri seem to have undergone a transformation, whereby the more lecherous episodes have been replaced by more benign ones, or simply left out, suggesting that by the time he heard them they had largely been reduced to children's tales.

The star Aurvandil's toe is here referred to, that is the Morning Star (Venus). That the planet was viewed as a toe shows some similarity to Grendel's severed arm or claw in Beowulf. The myth presented here might have incorporated this idea without being derived at all from the same myth. Rather, it is likely that the planet was known as Aurvandil's toe and this episode was later included to explain the name.

Skrymir

This myth contains the second individual tale in 'Thor's Journey to Utgard', here put back in its form as an individual myth. The only section removed was where Skrymir points out to Thor how to get to Utgard and suggests how he should not be too boastful when visiting the giant king Loki.

"And you do not now have very far to go on to the castle called Utgard. I have heard you whispering among yourselves that I am a person of no small build, but you will see bigger men there if you get into Utgard. Now I will give you some good advice: don't act big. Utgarda-Loki's men will not easily put up with impudence from babies like you. Otherwise turn back, and that I think will be the better course for you to take. But if you are determined to go on, then make for the east, but my road now lies to the north to these mountains that you should be able to see."

The combination of the story of Skrymir and Utgarda-Loki seems to have occurred fairly early. The presence of Thialfi and Loki on this journey would appear to have been a later addition, as they don't have any role in the story and there remains a singular pronoun when they should be plural, and so in this myth and the following one they have been removed.

In 'Harbard's Song', below, Skrymir is referred to as Fialar.

Utgarda-Loki

This myth constitutes the third in 'Thor's Journey to Utgard'. The myth originally seems to have been one to test Thor's strength against the giant-king Utgarda-Loki.

Certainly as Thor was the one to be tested, it seems that the contests with Thialfi and Loki were later additions.

Then the one who was in the rear of the party, which was Loki, said:

“I know a feat that I am quite prepared to have a go at, that there is no one inside here who can eat his food quicker than I.”

Then Utgarda-Loki replied: “That is a feat if you can perform it, and we must try out these feats,”—called down the bench that some one called Logi was to come out on to the floor and compete with Loki. Then a trencher was fetched and brought in on to the floor of the hall and filled with meat. Loki sat down at one end and Logi at the other, and each ate as quickly as he could and they met in the middle of the trencher. Loki had then eaten all the meat off the bones, but Logi had also eaten all the meat and the bones too and also the trencher, and it seemed to everyone now that Loki had lost the contest.

Then Utgarda-Loki asked what that young man there could perform, and Thialfi said that he would attempt to run a race of some kind with anyone Utgarda-Loki put forward. He said, Utgarda-Loki, that this was a good feat and declared he would indeed have to be good at running if he was to achieve this feat, and yet he said he would soon put it to the test. Then Utgarda-Loki got up and went out, and there was a good course there for running over level ground. Then Utgarda-Loki called to him a certain little fellow called Hugi and bade him run a race with Thialfi. Then they began the first race, and Hugi was so far ahead that he turned back to meet him at the end of the race. Then said Utgarda-Loki:

“You will have to make a greater effort, Thialfi, if you are going to win the contest, and yet it is true that never before have people come here that have seemed to me able to run faster than that.”

Then they began again another race, and when Hugi got to the end of the course and turned back, Thialfi was still a good arrow-shot behind. Then said Utgarda-Loki:

“Thialfi has I think run a good race, but I no longer have any confidence in him that he will win the contest. But we shall see now when they run the third race.”

Then they started another race. And when Hugi had got to the end of the course and turned back, then Thialfi had not reached half-way. Then everyone said that this contest was decided.

Then spoke Utgarda-Loki: “Now you shall be told the truth, now you have come outside the castle, which is that if I live and can have my way you shall never again come into it. And I swear by my faith that you never would have come into it if I had known before that you had such great strength in you, and that you were going to bring us so close to great disaster. But I have deceived you by appearances, so that the first time when I discovered you in the forest it was I that came and met you. And when you tried to undo the knapsack I had fastened it with trick wire, and you could not find where it had to be unfastened. And next you struck me three blows with your hammer, and the first was the smallest and yet it was so hard that it would have been enough to kill me if it had struck its mark. But where you saw near my hall a table-mountain, and down in it you saw three square valleys, one deepest of all, these were the marks of your hammer. I moved the table-mountain in front of your blows, but you did not

notice. So it was too with the games in which you competed with my men. The first was the one that Loki engaged in. He was very hungry and ate fast, but the one who is called Logi (flame), that was wildfire, and it burned the trencher just as quickly as the meat. And when Thialfi competed at running with the one called Hugi (thought), that was my thought, and Thialfi was not likely to be able to compete with its speed.

In addition, at the contests conclusion, only Thor is mentioned as leaving, suggesting a failure on the part of the redactor to modify that detail in the story. Utgarda-Loki is another name for Loki when in his underworld dwelling, and then later the god Loki became Thor's companion on this visit.

Mead of Poetry

In India 'rati' means sexual pleasure, and the Hindu Rati is its goddess.

Baldr's Dreams (Baldrs draumar)

Baldr's Death

This myth appears to combine two main stories: the first is the slaying of Baldr by Hod, the second is the binding of Loki. As the other three versions in Saxo's history, Beowulf, and Hromundar-saga Greipssonar do not mention Loki, he can be considered a later addition. Thus the binding of Loki was caused by a different circumstance that is not suggested anywhere, except that it might relate in some way to Skadi.

The story of Baldr's slaying also appears to incorporate two different stories, both attested in Beowulf. The first is the contest between Herebeald and Haethcyn:

"While I was his ward, he treated me no worse
as a wean about the place than one of his own boys,
Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac.
For the eldest, Herebeald, an unexpected
deathbed was laid out, through a brother's doing,
when Haethcyn bent his horn-tipped bow
and loosed the arrow that destroyed his life.
He shot wide and buried a shaft
in the flesh and blood of his own brother.
That offence was beyond redress, a wrongfooting
of the heart's affections; for who could avenge
the prince's life or pay his death-price?"

The second component of the story is the slaying of Grendel by Beowulf. Here Grendel is the Morning Star and his mother is the Sun. Grendel himself is immune to injury by any blade, just as Baldr cannot be harmed by any weapon. After his defeat, Grendel escapes back to the fen where he is said to die in Hell, just as Baldr is said to go off to Hel after his death. Grendel's mother is equivalent to Berchta, who in the north was the goddess Frigg, known for her fen hall.

The original story probably did not include a contest between the hero and Grendel's mother, rather he would have gone into the underworld to finish off Grendel. Having left his severed arm suspended in the sky (the morning star) his decapitated head may have become the Moon. Although it is not clear who the hero

who performs this might be, he might have gone by the name Biorn (bear). But in earlier versions Grendel (Aurvandil) himself would not yet have been made a demon.

At some time the story of Frigg and the death of her son was combined with the story of Herebald and Haethcyn. In addition Loki's involvement was incorporated to produce the myth told here. The boat burial seems clearly a late addition from the Viking age.

List of Rig (Rigsthula)

This myth breaks off, due to missing pages in the original, and cannot be reconstructed from alternative sources.

However in Ynglinga Saga the first man named king of the Danes was Rig, whose son was King Danp whose son was King Dan the Proud. The closest equivalent to Kin (Kon) here is Domar, who takes a Danish wife, the daughter of King Danp, and has a son Dygvi. King Dygvi's son was Dag who inherited the kingdom of Sweden from his father. It says of him:

He was so wise a man that he understood the song of the birds. He had a sparrow that told him many things; it often flew to other lands.

So just like Kin, Dag understood the birds, which suggests that the two stories are alternate versions of the descent of the Daglings. Snorri adds that it was the daughter of King Dag the Mighty, Dageid, who started the Dagling line. The story might have continued:

It happened once that the sparrow flew to Reidgotland, to a town which was called Vörva; it swooped down to a bonder's field and fed there. The bonder came up, took up a stone and slew the sparrow dead. King Dag became uneasy in his mind because the sparrow did not come home, went to the sacrifice of atonement to ask about it and received the answer that his sparrow was killed in Vörva. He afterwards ordered out a great army and went to Gotland; but when he came to Vörva he went up with his army and harried there; the folk fled far and wide from him. When it was near evening Dag led his army back to the ships after he had killed or taken many men. But when they crossed the river near a place called Skiotansvad or Vapnavad, a workman leaped forth from the wood to the river bank and cast a hayfork into the host of men, and it fell on the king's head. He straightway fell from his steed and died.

It is likely that the myth concerning the origin of mankind by Heimdall was later combined with the descent of the Danish kings from Rig.

Skirnir's Journey

Thor's Goats

This is the first part of 'Thor's Journey to Utgard', wherein the peasant farmer remains unnamed, but here is equated with Egil, mentioned in the myth about Hymir below. But there must have been a different version of the story in which Loki, rather than Thialfi, was responsible for breaking the leg bone, based on the

suggestion in the following myth. Also, in 'Skaldskaparmal', Loki is given the name of "thief of goat".

Hymir (Hymiskvida)

There is reason to believe that this myth is made up of two separate stories: the serpent (the same as the myth told first) and the cauldron.

The story of Thor's goats seems to be well placed right after they arrive at Egil's, but the end of the poem, that says the giant ('dweller on the lava') paid with both his children, leaves some question as to whether the giant meant is Egil or Loki. But it leaves no doubt as to Loki having been responsible for the deed, and who may have been Thor's original companion in the tale. Although Tyr is the god who accompanies Thor, MacCulloch suggests that it is merely 'tyr', meaning 'god', and thus the god may have been Loki.

Geirrod

Binding of Fenrir

The myth of Tyr's contest with the wolf was likely a mere description before someone later decided to contribute some color to it, and this may have occurred as late as Viking times. And in this myth his adversary is an unnamed wolf, only in the introduction is it matched with Fenrir.

A passage in The Kalevala suggests a similar story about the binding of dogs:

'Press the rowan collar down
around his snub nose:
if the rowan will not hold
have one case out of copper;
if the copper is not firm
make a collar of iron;
but if he snaps the iron
if he still goes wrong
wedge a golden cowlstaff from
jawbone to jawbone
jam the ends in hard
fix them really fast
so the bad jaws cannot move
nor the few teeth part, unless
they are shattered with iron
wrenched away with steel
or bloodied with knives
or jerked with an axe!'

Building of Asgard's Wall

Theft of Idunn's Apples

The two stories here of Thiassi's theft of Idunn and Skadi's marriage to Niord seem likely to have not originally been connected. There is no way of telling when they were combined, except it was after the merging of the Aesir and Vanir gods. The marriage of Niord might well have a late origin (and there is no reason to believe

that Skadi is the mother of Freyr and Freyia). Skadi's original reason for seeking out the gods for retribution may have been something that Loki had done, which explains their animosity.

The stars that most resemble two eyes are the Gemini stars Castor and Pollux. These stars arise only during the winter and at midnight reach their highest point during January, the harshest winter month, and this would well relate to Skadi as a goddess of winter.

Here the meaning of the husband being chosen by judging his feet remains obscure, but a similar emphasis is placed upon the feet in passages from The Kalevala:

Don't be charmed by a bridegroom
by a bridegroom's mouth
don't trust the look in his eyes
or gaze upon his fine feet!

Maiden, you sister
don't be charmed by the bridegroom
by the bridegroom's speeches, nor
yet by his fine feet!

Perhaps the condition of a man's feet was a sign of youth or status, whereby his feet were better as a result of not having done hard labor. In Gauda, India it was the hands, made beautiful by long nails, that made a man desirable.

Theft of Sif's Hair

This would appear to be one of the later myths, written by some enterprising poet to explain the origin of the various objects of the gods. There is no way of knowing when it was composed but it may have been as late as the Viking times.

Theft of Thor's Hammer (Thrymskvida)

This myth too seems to be a much later myth that was composed for no other reason than to entertain an audience with an amusing tale. Its manner suggests that it is from the time after the adoption of Christianity, when the tales were still told and adapted.

Prophecy of the Seeress (Voluspa)

This myth details the creation and the earliest years, conveyed by the seeress to Odin. Here the seeress is from the very earliest times and has risen up from the underworld to convey this information. At the end, after a vision of Hel, Ragnarok is detailed just before the end is nigh.

Here the creation is performed by the sons of Bur, not named specifically, but they would be Odin, Vili and Ve according to Snorri. Although Odin, Haenir and Lodur are mentioned later, there is no reference that they were the same as the sons of Bur, nor that they are brothers.

Ymir seems only to appear in the opening by the compiler of the poem, as the stuff of creation is the corpse of the giant Brimir, also referred to as Blain (blue corpse). Brimir is mentioned again in 'Sigdrifa's Sayings', where Odin is said to be holding Brimir's sword over the decapitated Mimir.

The verse 'The sons of Mim are at play and Fate catches fire at the ancient Giallar-horn' seems to be speaking of the Well of Fate (Urd) catching fire, indicating also that this and the Well of Mimir were interchangeable. Snorri includes a quotation about Weird's Well (Urd's Well) that says "Weird rose from the well", which intimates Urd and Mimir were the same. The sons of Mim may be the planets.

Sayings of the High One (Havamal)

This collection is comprised of three parts: the first a collection of proverbs, then Odin telling of his learning the use of the runes, and third the advice to Loddafnir overheard by one in Odin's hall. In this the repetition of "I advise you, Loddafnir, to take this advice, it will be useful if you learn it, do you good, if you have it" has been removed.

The first part of this myth makes reference to the Mead of Poetry and in this version it is said to be contained in the vessel Odrerir. Snorri adds in 'Skaldskaparmal' that the mead of poetry was made in the cauldron Odrerir. The inclusion of names for other pots holding the mead, Bodn and Son, by Snorri suggest again that these might have been the terms used in a different version of the tale. Kvasir, the source of the mead in Snorri's version, is absent here, but this does not mean he was unknown to the poet.

The Billing referred to appears to be another spelling of Gilling, the giant killed by Fialar and Galar in the myth of the mead. A substitute phrase for the mead of poetry is the "drink of Billing's son", suggesting that the story of how Odin came to possess the mead referred to here is a slightly different one from the full myth. Likewise, there is a reference in 'Sayings of the High One' to having become drunk both at Fialar's and Gunnlod's places.

The original myth referred to here might have followed this sequence: A giant or dwarf named Fialar was possessor of the mead of poetry, but because Fialar had been responsible for Billing's death, was forced to give it to Billing's son Suttung. Odin first visited Fialar, then Billing's widow. He was frustrated, so made promises to Suttung and proposed to his daughter Gunnlod. On their wedding night, she was willing to let him have a single drink of the mead. After taking it all in one draught, Odin made his way out through the stone wall by the use of a drill, and the giants searched for him high and low.

Here Odin is like the god Indra, who boasted of having gotten drunk from the Soma, just as Odin says he got drunk from the mead of poetry.

Vafthrudnir's Sayings (Vafthrudnismal)

Although the giant's name given is Vafthrudnir (great riddler) this might be an epithet for Mimir. The hall Odin arrives at is one that belongs to Im's father, either implying that Vafthrudnir is Im's father or that Im is Vafthrudnir. If it means that Im is his name, this too could be equivalent to Mim. Of further relevance is that Vafthrudnir like Mimir is a wise giant and that he and Odin both wager their heads, suggesting that the fate of Vafthrudnir is the same as Mimir.

In 'Grimnir's Sayings' Odin says:

'Svidur and Svidrir I was called at Sokkmimir's,
and I tricked the old giant then,
when I became the sole slayer of the famous
son of Midvidnir.'

So that given Sokkmimir (deep Mimir) is Mimir, Odin claims responsibility for having slain the wise giant himself, thus drawing an even further identification between the two (even though in this myth he goes by Gagnrad and not Svidur or Svidrir). Sokkmimir's father's name 'Midvidnir' could mean 'mead robber' (miod-vitnir). So in the same way Suttung took the mead and set his daughter as guardian, so might Midvidnir have placed his son Sokkmimir to guard it, though there is nothing to verify this.

This does not imply that the myth itself is of ancient origin, rather it contains a selection of mythological material that was likely composed later rather than earlier. However, the story of Odin and Mimir is surely of early origin.

Sigrdrifa's Sayings

Taken from 'Sigrdrifumal' (Song of Sigrdrifa), this exchange constitutes a chapter in the story of the Volsungs. Here a certain drink is implied to have been the inspiration for the carving of runes, but it is said to have come from the skull of Heiddraupnir (bright dropper) and the horn of Hoddrofnir (hoard-tearer). Hropt himself is Odin and seems to have drunk the mead from the Well of Mimir. Mim too appears as the one who teaches Odin how the runes are to be used.

This seems to imply other references to the Moon, such as the skull visible on its surface and the horn that is equivalent to Giallarhorn. (The Moon itself could also have been seen not as a well but as a drinking horn, thus explaining the origin of its phases for the same reason a well would explain them.)

The reference to Brimir's sword relates back to the giant named in 'Prophecy of the Seeress' and even without an explanation implies that Brimir might well have been a giant killed by Odin, who came to possess his sword. Whoever Brimir was, he was certainly attested to have been dead and residing at his beer-hall in Hel. Thus, in this case, Odin does not attain a drink from the well through a sacrifice of his eye, but because he got access by killing its guardian.

This is contrasted by 'Sayings of the High One' where Odin first attained the runes, but only after drinking the Mead of Poetry was he able to understand and use them; also 'Mead of Poetry', where the runes are not even mentioned.

The two stories compare in this manner: in the first Odin takes a drink from the Well of Mimir to learn the runes, then gets advice from wise Mim's head to learn how to use them, in the second Odin learns the runes from hanging on the World Tree, then drinks the Mead of Poetry to learn how to use them. This suggests two distinct Odinic traditions, but there is no way to learn from where they each originated.

In Indian myth, the intoxicating drink soma was known as the 'well of immortality'. It was attained by Indra from his father Tvastr while it's secret was held by Dadhyanc, who yielded only after Indra cut off his head. After his head had fallen into a lake, it then rose up to tell Indra the secret.

Grimnir's Sayings (Grimnismal)

Harbard's Song (Harbardzliod)

Loki's Quarrel (Lokasenna)

This myth and other references hint to a strong contention existing between Skadi and Loki. In 'Skaldskaparmal' Loki is called Skadi's adversary (the only other

named is Heimdall). This suggests that more took place between Skadi when he went to visit Thiassi than remains in the myth. In addition, whatever the source of the enmity, it is Skadi who places the snake over Loki in both versions of the tale.

All-wise's Sayings (Alvissmal)

Song of Hyundla (Hyndluliod)

Shorter Prophecy of the Seeress (Voluspa in skamma)