A Few Facts about Old Norse Religion

by

Gunnar Gällmo

A tree there is, a mighty ash called *Yggdrasill*. In it is to be found our world, and all the worlds. It is, in short, the universe. Three roots it has: one among gods, one among giants, and one among the dead.

"You have got this text for nothing. Since, however, even writers who don't care about money have grocers who do, you're welcome to reciprocate, if you wish and are able to, by a gift to my Swedish postal giro account, Stockholm 57 31 89-8 (Gunnar Gällmo)."

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Introduction

This is a book about the religion that dominated Norhern Europe until about a thousand years ago, when Christianity was introduced in the region. That was an ethnical religion, like Hinduism and Judaism, not a founded one like Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, which means that it is difficult to find a systematic doctrine in it. It is doubtful whether there ever was one. Old Norse religion wasn't a church. It had no pope and no catechism. In general, ethnical religion is practice first and theory second, if at all; it is not so much something to believe in as something to do. The myths are nor the foundation of religion, but a superstructure of the cult.

Therefore, I have elected to present the subject beginning with the cultural and historical backgrund, continuing with the cult and a short presentation of the individual gods and groups of lesser deities, and taking up the myths only afterwards. Some of them may have a long past, but in the form they are known to us they were written down just shortly before the *forn sidhr* ("Ancient Practice") was forbidden, and even after that, since in Iceland it took much longer time for the Christian Church to establish its intolerance than in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden; and Icelandic authors continued, even if they themselves were Christian (such as Snorri Sturluson), to make literary use of the old myths.

I have concentrated on Old Norse religion from the time we know anything about it, i. e. from its last centuries, largely coinciding with the Viking Age (*víkinga-öld*, roughly the years 750-1100; in England one might count it from the raid against Lindisfarne in 793 to the battle of Hastings in 1066). It was much older, of course, but from Stone, Bronze, and earlier Iron Age there are no written sources, just archaeological findings, and what can be said out of those are essentially more or less intelligent guesses. Possibly very intelligent, but still just guesses.

I have also refrained from discussing the groups of "New Old Norse" devotees who have come into existence during our century. They are an interesting phenomenon, but they are still small (even if they have been granted an official position in Iceland) and relatively new, and they lack an historical continuity to the old times.

It is true that traces of the "Ancient Practice" remained very long after Northern Europe was officially christianized, but those traces were very much connected to an agricultural society, and I don't think they can be said to have survived the beginning of industrialism. When Norhern Europe became Protestant in the 16th century, the old gods couldn't even survive in the guise of Christian saints, as they had until then, and as have for example the Greek and Roman gods, or the ones of the Mayas and other indigenous peoples in Latin America.

The groups of "New Old Norse religion" have to live in a society that is

industrial or post-industrial, as well as post-Christian, so they have to act under quite different conditions. Besides, I have the impression that they tend to concentrate on the grand old *aesir*, while the surviving traces of the old cult were more oriented towards *álfar*, *landvaettir*, and possibly *vanir*; and to build up some kind of systematized theology, which is a trait of founded religions, not of ethnical ones. (For example, Hinduism as a whole doesn't have any, although individual Hindu sects - which, unlike Hinduism in general, are founded - may have; and as far as it can be found in Judaism, which is debatable, it has been evolved under Christian and Muslim pressure.) I think it is symptomatic that the present followers of "New Old Norse religion" in Iceland are naming it *ásatrú*, "belief in the *aesir*", rather than *forn sidhr*, "ancient practice", as was the old term (when a term was needed, i. e. when the old religion was confronted with Christianity).

These groups also have to face the not unimportant problem that our sources of knowledge about Old Norse religion are extremely fragmentary. Their situation is somewhat similar to the one of a group a thousand years from now who would try to revive Christianity, if it had died out in the meantime, and if all Christian texts had been lost except the four gospels. (If you think the Christian doctrine is contained in them, you haven't read them attentively.)

If these groups turn out to be important, which remains to be seen, they will merit a study of their own.

One important problem when describing Old Norse religion is that it is one of the many losers of history, since it was wiped out by victorious Christendom, and history is mostly written by the winners. Up to the beginning of our century, almost all in the West who wrote about non-Christian religions either were honest Christians themselves, or at least had to make believe they were, so they just had to depict the old religion in a less flattering way than the new one. Extinct religions should preferably not be judged by those forces who crushed them.

In our century, perhaps the first who claimed to believe in the Old Norse religion again were a group of German Nazis, and they weren't reliable either. Later groups of followers are mostly not Nazi, but as mentioned above they, too, have problems to make the actual picture fit their ideas.

To present my own position, I am neither Christian nor a follower of the *aesir*, and most definitively not Nazi - I am religiously Theravada Buddhist, and politically clearly not right-wing. Therefore I hope I've managed to be relatively impartial when judging the merits of Old Norse religion as compared to those of Christianity. But some Christians may not agree with my claim, because such an impartial comparison might not be as flattering to them as they may wish.

As part of my aimed-at impartiality, I have tried never to use the words "pagan" and "heathen" and their derivations. They are used by many comparative religionists, but to do so is deeply unscholarly. Those terms are insultive. They

imply that the religions so labeled are inferior to the religions not so labeled, and of that I am by no means convinced. It is true that Old Norse religion had certain aspects which I don't like at all - especially the sacrifice of animals and men - but so do Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam. I see no difference between killings in the temple of Upsala and killings in the temple of Jerusalem.

Vikings and Other Indo-Europeans

In the English-speaking world, the old time Scandinavians are probably most known through the vikings, who were a kind of combined merchants and robbers travelling around Europe during the last centuries of the first millennium. (The combination of merchant and robber may same strange to you, if you are innocent, but it is actually much older. In ancient Greece, already a couple of millennia before the vikings, the god Hermes was patron of both businessmen and thieves. If you happen to know some modern businessmen, you might not find that strange at all.)

The vikings were skilled at sailing and fighting. They were often described as touchy and quarrelsome, as having alcoholic problems (beer and mead were their most common beverages), and as being too individualistic to form well-disciplined armies. They operated mostly in small bands. Their alliances were loose and short-lived. The vikings were tough in front of cold and hardship, they were shrewd when bartering and could be cruel when fighting. (So were most fighting people at that time, and I suspect they still are, although they might try to observe more discretion nowadays.)

The Old Norse peoples were roughly divided into four ethnical groups, called *nordhmenn*, svíar, danir, and gautar (i. e. Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, and, probably, Gotlanders - the latter not to be confused with the Goths, who spoke an East Germanic language, not a North Germanic one like the four peoples mentioned).

The Swedish and Gotlandic vikings in the 9th and 10th centuries travelled mostly eastwards, across the Baltic Sea and along the rivers of East and Central Europe to Constantinople (in Old Norse *Mikligardhr*, "Metropolis"), where the East Roman Imperial Guard was almost a hundred per cent Nordic for more than a century (and where someone cut rune graffiti, probably meaning "Halfdan was here", in the Hagia Sophia cathedral), and to the coasts of the Caspian Sea, founding on the way the city-states of Novgorod and Kiev, and crossing the Silk Way to China; and from the Caspian Sea some of them continued overland through Persia and Mesopotamia to Bagdad.

Danes and Norwegians as a rule preferred to go westwards (and in the 11th century, many Swedes went with them), along the coast to the British isles (where they founded a country called *Dena-lagu* and gave Nordic names to several towns, including Jorvik, later anglified to York, the duke of which even later gave his name to a certain North American city until then called New Amsterdam) and western France (the word "Norman" actually means "Norwegian", or more generally "Northern man", and the province called Normandie got its name when it was given by the Frankish emperor Charles III, "the Simpleton", to the Norwegian

viking chief Rollo or Göngu-Hrolf to keep him quiet; but when Rollo's descendant William conquered England in 1066, one and a half centuries later, his men were already French assimilados, and actually began to put a stop to the Viking Age), around Hispany (which had not yet been divided in Spain and Portugal) and into the Mediterranean - they are said still to have descendants in Sicily.

Some Norwegians also managed, driven by overpopulation at home and quarrels with authorities, to cross open sea and discover Iceland (quite a feat, since viking ships had neither compass nor nautical charts). There they founded a new society - a republic of independent farmers, as a reaction against the kingdom from which they had fled, with a parliament two hundred years older than Westminster (and more than seven hundred years older than the US Congess) in *Thingvellir*, some thirty miles east of Reykjavík.

The first Icelandic republic continued until 1271, when the island came under the rule of Norway. In 1380 Norway, and thereby Iceland, was dominated by Denmark; and the Danish monarch remained Iceland's chief of state until World War II, when Iceland and Denmark were occupied by opposing camps, and the Icelanders caught the opportunity to be an independent republic again.

Discovering America from Iceland is actually less extraordinary than discovering Iceland from Europe. Whether Iceland itself is geographically European or not is a matter of definition - it is not situated on the European shelf, but right on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It might even be said, therefore, to be riding on the very border between Europe and North America. Some Icelanders claim that the borderline is exactly at Thingvellir, but I am not certain about that. If it is so regarded, however, Columbus could be said to have come to America already a couple of decades *before* he left Spain for the Caribbean; for during his Portuguese period, in the 1470:s, he travelled by merchant ships to Reykjavík, which is situated on Icelands <u>west</u> coast - thus on the "American" side of the island.

North of Reykjavík, there is a peninsula called Snaefellsnes, with a glacier called Snaefellsjökull, 1446 meters over sea level. Sometimes, if the weather is clear, it is possible to se therefrom a mirage in the west: an upside-down image of the coast of Greenland, just 320 kilometres away, which is part of the North American shelf, and whose original inhabitants must be said to be North American or even East Asian, Eskimo territory stretching to Greenland across Alaska and Canada from easternmost Siberia.

From Iceland some vikings led by a man named Eiríkr Raudhi, "Eric the Read", once again after quarrels with authorities (although this time parliamentary and not royal ones), continued to Greenland (whose climate was at that time somewhat milder than it is today, so its name - invented by Eiríkr, mainly as a gimmick to help the recruiting of colonizers - wasn't quite as absurd as it seems now); and from there some people stumbled on Canada and went to what is now Labrador in

Newfoundland (where a settlement has been found in L'Anse aux Meadows); but Eiríkr Raudhi's son Leifr Eiriksson, who is said to have led that last leg of the colonization, was a convert to Christianity, same as his mother. (His father, though, seems to have been faithful to the "Ancient Practice", although his wife refused to share his bed if he didn't forswear it, according to a relatively late text called *Eiríks Saga Raudha*; but an older text, *Graenlendinga Saga*, says that Eirík died before Christianity was introduced in Greenland).

This part of North America they called Vineland (*Vinland*). Even if they hadn't got quite as far - but even Italian scholars have admitted that they probably did - Columbus couldn't claim the doubtful honour of being the first European to "discover" the Americas. He personally never touched American mainland. (Although he insisted that Cuba is not a Japanese island, as ignorant people claimed, but a Chinese peninsula, this has later turned out not to be quite correct.) He only visited American islands, of which Greenland too happens to be one, and there is not the slightest doubt that the Icelanders had a colony in Greenland for several centuries, although it died out (perhaps because the climate worsened) about the same time as Columbus visited Reykjavík - and who knows what stories he heard in the taverns there? He was fond of listening to yarns, and Icelanders have always been fond of telling them.

The colony in Vineland had failed much earlier, according to the sagas only three years after its establishment, because of more and more hostile relations to the original inhabitants, i. e. to those who really discovered America; whether at this place and time they were Eskimos or Indians we do not know for certain.

It is highly improbable that the vikings should have visited any other parts of the Americas than Greenland and some places at the Canadian east coast, though many forgeries have been fabricated to make us believe it. The most spectacular of those is perhaps the Kensington Stone in Minnesota. (An Old Norse coin has been fund in Maine, but coins travel more widely than people, so that doesn't prove very much.)

And now I would like to kill a good story, and destroy the market for many cartoon creators:

The vikings did not have horns on their helmets, as far as we know. Horned vikings were invented by some 19th century painters. In so far as horned helmets have been found by archaeologists, they are from the Bronze Age (in Scandinavia around 1500-500 B. C., i. e. a couple of millennia *before* the Viking Age), and probably used for ceremonial purposes - not in battle, where they are not very useful.

Besides, the vikings (in the strict sense of the word) were actually just a small minority of the population in Northern Europe. Most people there were farmers, and farmers' thralls, living perhaps not always quite peacefully (especially not in

Iceland, which was the Old Norse Wild West and pioneer country). Some craftsmen there were as well, of which especially the blacksmith was highly respected - the swords and spears and axes he made were sorely needed, he was rumoured to have magical knowledge, and besides smiths tend to have muscles; and next to him came the carpenter, who made ships and shields as well as ploughs. In any case, the vast majority seldom ventured abroad to pester other peoples.

Old Norse society was very much built on the family. Only thralls and outlaws were not supported by kith and kin, and every family member had an absolute duty to protect each other if possible, and if not to revenge.

The Old Norse people were not only fighters and manual workers, though. There were skilled authors among them long before they had any writers - let's not confuse "text" and "scripture". Many illiterate peoples have had advanced literatures, memorized by heart and inherited from generation the generation. History is much older than historical sources; which means that the science of history, even if completed with the science of archaeology, can never cover more than a tiny fraction of history as such. Man started thinking before he learned to read and write, and although the oldest written sources of Old Norse religion are late, short and fragmentary, they give expression to a poetic tradition which was by no means new-born when the texts were finally written down.

The language spoken by the vikings and their countrymen were a group of North Teutonic, thus Indo-European, dialects. (It is not definitively known when the first people speaking Indo-European languages came to Northern Europe. Those who came immediately after the Ice Age probably were not Indo-European.)

These dialects were later to develop into the still relatively pure Nordic Icelandic and Faroeish in the West, and in the East into Danish and Swedish, which were in the Middle Ages heavily influenced by Low German. (Modern Norwegian is actually half Danish. Modern Icelandic, on the other hand, is almost a hundred per cent Norwegian. What is nowadays called Old Icelandic - except in Norway, for very good reasons - was actually Old Norwegian.) These dialects were still quite close to East Teutonic languages like Gothic, and to West Teutonic languages like German and Anglo-Saxon, which would later be mixed with Norman (!) French and develop into English. (The Saxons, by the way, came from Germany - Saxony is still a part of that country - and the Angles, who gave their name to England and the present English language, from southern Jutland in what is now Denmark.)

The Old Norse religion was quite close, almost identical, to the religion of the Germanic peoples on the Continent and the British Isles, but it survived much longer, since it took longer time for the Christian church to get the power necessary to crush it in the North.

The relationship between the Germanic religions is witnessed by the fact that

the days of the week from Tuesday to Friday are still named after the same gods in English, Dutch, German and the Scandinavian languages, while they are named after Greco-Roman gods in French, Spanish, and Italian. (In Modern Icelandic and Portuguese, interestingly enough, these names have been censored and replaced by simple numbers.) Some stories told in the Poetic Edda take place in the Rhineland, and are roughly identical in contents with the somewhat later German *Nibelungenlied*.

Old Norse religion was also related, although not quite as close, to the religions of other Indo-Europeans, such as Celtic, Roman, Greek, Persian, and ancient North Indian. One can see that in the fact that several gods in the different Indo-European Pantheons had similar functions. For example, the position of the god of thunder was quite high in them all, and in the Germanic area he even had the same name as in India, with some phonetic changes - in Sanskrit he was called Indra, in German Donar, in Anglo-Saxon Thunor, and in Old Norse Thórr. The English word "thunder", too, is the same word.

(Ancient North Indian or Vedic religion should, by the way, not to be mixed up with modern Hinduism, which is quite different, after long contact with Dravidian and other Non-Indo-European peoples in India, and after a long and profound confrontation and intermixture with Islam.)

Old Norse religion has in our century got a bad reputation, for the anacronistic reason that the Nazis were interested in it, and because some Scandinavian skinheads still are. However, they both misunderstood it completely. The vikings were most probably not racist - they may have had a contempt for the lower classes, and for strangers (even according to local laws far into Christian times, the fines for killing someone from the neighbouring province were lower than for killing someone from your own), but it was not connected with any theory about race. Even if violent, vikings were not fanatical in religious or political matters, or at all about ideology (unless you count as such the family honour, which was one of the few areas where they *were* fanatical - and where skinheads are not). If they had at all heard the word "Arian", that would probably have been when meeting some Persians in the East, and they certainly did not associate it with themselves. As far as I know, they did not worry about Jews or, in pre-Christian times, even mention them.

They certainly were not afraid of influences from southern countries. They brought them. They seem to have been able to communicate quite easily with people of other cultures. When emigrating, they often were rapidly integrated and even assimilated in their new environments - William the Conquerer was culturally French, although his Norwegian ancestor Rollo had come to Normandy just one and a half century earlier.

(The same can be said about emigrant waves of later ages. If we look e. g. at

Swedes in the USA, already a first generation immigrant like Joel Hägglund - better known as Joe Hill - gave an important contribution the American literature and political history with his songs written directly in English, and a descendant of Swedes like William Rehnquist is as fully American as William the Conqueror was French, with nothing Scandinavian in them except their ancestry.)

For centuries before they were converted to Christianity (by force in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway; by vote in Iceland), the late Iron Age Scandinavians were in touch with both Christians and Muslims, and even Buddhists - a small Buddha image, probably made in India, has been found in Helgö, just outside present Stockholm, where a settlement was founded in the 5th century or even earlier; there it was brought in the 6th or 7th century, perhaps from some Buddhist community at the shores of the Caspian Sea. Old Norse theology, as far as it can be said to have existed, may have been influenced by all three world religions.

The Cult

Old Norse cult, of whose liturgical details we know very little, was either public (common for a country or part of it) or private. The cult centres were often connected to the places where people met to decide about judicial matters, and to buy and sell.

A central function in Old Norse cult (same as in e. g. Roman, Greek, Celtic, Vedic, or Old Testament Jewish) was the sacrifice of lifeless objects (in Northern Europe they could be amber or metal, or part of the harvest, or food and drink), of animals (horses, cattle, pigs, and goats), and sometimes of human beings (such as Jephthah's daughter, to cite the only Biblical example). Public sacrifice was practiced at regular intervals, according to a lunar calendar.

The Swedes had their main temple at Upsala (nowadays Old Upsala, a few kilometres north of modern Upsala, probably at the place where there is now a small Christian church - the temple was destroyed in the 1080:s). "Temple" here should probably be taken to mean a place of mainly outdoors worship, since this was common Germanic practice, rather than a magnificent house. The German 11th century historian Adam of Bremen did describe the Upsala temple as a golden palace, but he never was there. Other Latin sources talk of sacred groves and similar places. Some of these holy places were not even enclosed.

The main annual sacrifice in Upsala was carried out at full moon the second month after Yule month, and it was made *til gródhrar*, "for the crops". At the same time, one had a judicial meeting and a commercial market at the same place.

The sacrifice at the beginning of summer seems to have been especially solemn each ninth year. At such occasions, according to Adam of Bremen, nine male animals were killed of each species, as well as nine men. The blood was smeared at the altar and dashed at the images of the gods, at the walls of the temple, and at the participants; but the dead bodies were hung in a sacred grove close to the temple. Besides, a man was sacrificed by drowning in a sacred well, also close to the temple. If his corpse was not found afterward, it was thought that the gods had accepted the sacrifice, which meant that the people's wish would be fulfilled.

During public sacrifice, there was a sacred meal where meat from the killed animals, especially horses, was eaten by the participants, and where beer or mead was drunk. The filled cup was consecrated by the sacrificer to the gods of fertility, the *vanir*, with the formula "For a good year, and for peace" (*til árs ok fridhar*), and to the supreme war god Odhinn, chief among the *aesir*, "for the King's victory and power". The drink was poured into horns, which were passed from man to man.

There was no full-time professional priesthood. The priest, *godhi*, who as a rule inherited his position, had also secular duties. He was a political leader and a judge.

The most important sacrifices should be carried out by the highest ruler himself,

who was responsible for a good relation between the people and the gods. If some calamity ocurred, for example if the country had ill luck in war or got bad harvests, he would be held to have failed in this duty. In such a case he could, if he was lucky, be forced to abdicate. If he was less lucky, he might himself be sacrificed.

Divination was an important part of Old Norse cult, both public and private. The drowning of a man during Ninth Year Sacrifice in Upsala served that purpose, as mentioned above. Divination could also be made by help of the blood of the sacrificed animals, or by the behaviour of living sacred beasts, especially horses. The method of divination most often mentioned is called to *fella blótspán* - to throw, during sacrifice, chips or sticks and interpret the way they fall.

One way of divination was to sleep, e. g. on top of a burial mound, and afterwards interpret the dreams. Such dreams could bring inspiration or healing. They could be thought to come from the dead within the mound, or from some god connected with them, such as Freyr. Freyr or Thórr could also be consulted in his shrine or beside some sacred object, such as a holy tree or stone.

Private cult also included animal sacrifice, for example in connection with the regular autumn slaughter. When sowing began, old bread was broken and thrown on the ground together with the seeds, and three toasts were drunk - one for the plougher, one for the draught-beast, and one for the plough - in honour of the gods. Much of the private cult was secret, though, so we actually don't know many details about it. The sources are few. During private sacrifice, strangers were normally not permitted to be present. It seems that private sacrifices were, as a rule, not devoted so much to the two main groups of gods, *aesir* and *vanir*, but to the elves (*álfar*). These were fertility powers, probably somewhat connected with the *vanir*. Some scholars think they were identical with the spirits of the departed, but this is uncertain.

We know that Yule was an important occasion for the private cult, and Scandinavian eating habits around Christmas (which in our languages is still called *jul*) even now show traces from those times. (Much pork is eaten, which is a pretty funny way to celebrate the birth of a Jew; but the celebrating started centuries before it got its present - or nowadays actually pre-present - contents.) The celebrating was called "to drink Yule", which may say a lot about how it was done.

Regular sacrifices were also celebrated at the middle of October (*til árs*, "for the year") and April ("for the King's peace and victory"), to mark the borderline between winter and summer half-years. Snorri also mentions a *midhsumarsblót*, "Midsummer Sacrifice".

Fire was holy. It may have been associated with the red-haired and red-bearded Thórr, since the connection between thunder and fire is obvious. When new country was colonized, it was ritually encircled by fire. (Cf. the story, told later in this book, about how Thjálfi or Thjelvar saved Gotland from regularly sinking in

the sea, by bringing for the first time fire to the island.) The family hearth was sacred, same as among other Indo-European peoples.

So was the house master's seat, placed against the northern wall of the house, so the family father sat facing south and the sun. At each side of his seat there was a pole, perhaps with Thórr's image carved into it. When Iceland was colonized by the Norwegians, those poles were some-times used for divination - they were thrown from the ship into the sea close to land, and the gods were then supposed to steer their course; so where they landed, the new house was built.

An element equally important as fire to a sea-faring people was, of course, water. Several gods were directly connected to the sea, such as Njordhr, Aegir, and Rán, and Njordhr's son Freyr had a marvelous ship. In some of our churches today, you can see "votive ships" given by people as thanks to God for being saved from shipwrecking. The givers may honestly have believed this to be a Christian practice, but in fact, it was in use not only before Christianity was introduced, but even before Christ was born, already in the Bronze Age. From early Iron Age, there are also tombs with a row of stones formed as a ship, in Gotland and other places.

The birth of a child was, same as in other religions, a cause for cult. Delivery should be indoors, but on the earthen floor, thus in touch with Mother Earth. After delivery, water was ritually poured over the child. (When the Christians later brought their baptism, it probably wasn't regarded as one of their greater innovations.) The choice of the child's name had a religious significance. Often, the child got the name of a newly departed relative. (The Poetic Edda mentions that there had at an earlier stage been a belief in rebirth.) When the child got it first tooth, it should have a "tooth gift".

There were, of course, religious ceremonies around funerals as well. As soon as someone had died, eyes and mouth should be closed, the body washed, the hair combed, the nails cut and the clippings disposed of. (The last is very important, since the last battle and the end of this world - *ragnarökr* - can't take place until the evil powers has built their ship *Naglfar* of dead people's unclipped nails.) After a decided number of days, the body was buried or burnt. (Practice varied. In later Viking Age, it seems that cremation was associated with Odhinn and inhumation with Thórr.) Gifts were placed in the tomb to be used on the other side - clothes, food, household utensils, weapons, tools, ornaments, animals, even thralls if the dead had been rich - and the present people had a meal together, very sacred and very amusing. (Cf. the Irish song "Lots of Fun at Winnegan's Wake"! Germanic and Celtic peoples had been in touch with each other at least since very early Iron Age.) Sacrifice could be given at the tomb regularly afterwards. This has been done as late as our century.

Vikings were seafarers, so some high people could (according to some scholars, but others disagree) be cremated in their ships floating on sea, lake, or river, such

as was done the Baldr's corpse in the myth of his death. Some bodies have also been buried in boats.

It seems that the dead, in a way, had two parallel after-lives - one in the tomb, where they needed those gifts; and the other in the halls of either Odhinn or Freyja, if they had died with honour, or in Hel, if they had not. (But neither place is eternal. Those who have died with honour from this life will do it again at *ragnarökr*, in light's last battle against darkness when the great gods themselves will also die, and it is not clear whether this time they will just be gone for ever, or whether they can expect still a new after-life.)

A special practice was sworn brotherhood, when two or several men adopted each other by mixing their blood, invoking the gods as witnesses and guarantors. By this, the parties involved accepted the same mutual duties as had biological siblings. (How serious this was is shown in the myth about how the high god Odhinn, at the beginning of time, entered such a sworn brotherhood with the hopeful young giant Loki, who unfortunately turned out later to be absolutely rotten and going all the time from bad to worse, from naughty to evil, until Odhinn at last didn't have any other alternatives than either letting wickedness rule freely or breaking his oath, which also was an extremely evil thing to do.)

As a fighting people, the vikings had special rites of battle. Some of these rites, perhaps including drogues (some have proposed that they ate fly agaric, while others have objected that teutonic peoples generally don't have a very old tradition of eating mushrooms), seem to have been psychologically very efficient. They made the warriors fight wildly without caring whether they themselves would survive or not. Warriors in such an uninhibited state were called *bersekr*. They were said to be inspired by Odhinn. Their state seems similar to, and perhaps identical with, the one called in Malay *amoq*.

About private prayer and other less formal aspects of Old Norse religion, we know very little indeed. It is to be supposed that it did not differ very much from similar practices in most other religions.

Different gods were popular in different circles (same as the saints, in whose guise they appeared in the first centuries of "Christian" times). Odhinn was the god of warlords, of kings and earls. Warriors of lower rank worshipped Tyr, a war-god younger in mythology but probably older in cult.

Among simple people, among farmers and seafarers, the áss most popular was Thórr, the god of thunder - thus connected with the weather, which is essential to farmers, and at sea. He was quite important among the high-born as well. His image was to be seen in many temples, and it often had the place of honour. In the Upsala temple, his figure was said to be in the middle, with Odhinn and Freyr at both sides; so while Odhinn was highest in mythology, at least in litterate times, Thórr may have been highest in cult.

Thórr's hammer was the symbol of the old religion, when such a symbol was needed, and its followers used the sign of the hammer to bless and protect, same as the Christians used the sign of the cross. It is not clear exactly how it was done, but the two signs may not have been very different in actual practice. Small hammers were worn round the neck by the faithful, same as the cross by the apostates. (In the National Museum of Copenhagen, Denmark, there is an ancient mould by which a founder could cast a Thórr's hammer and a Christ's cross at the same time. Business has its own tolerance...)

Interestingly enough, Thórr's hammer has made come-back as an ornament in Sweden during the last few years. Ten years ago, it was used only by a small group of people who wanted to revive the old religion, and by an equally small group of neo-Nazis; but now many seem to regard it just as part of our cultural heritage.

As is natural in an agricultural society, the farmers also gave much worship to the deities of fertility - vanir like Freyr, Freyja and Njordhr, as well as elves - and local protectors like the *landvaettir*. The image of Freyr was carried around in the country-side to bring fertility to the fields.

The war between *aesir* and *vanir* mentioned in Old Norse mythology perhaps reflects a clash between two pantheons when a new ethnical group entered the region and had a conflict with those who already lived here. The cult of the *vanir* may be old indeed, maybe since Bronze or even Stone Age, while the *aesir* could be a later addition. The *vanir* may also have been worshipped long after the old religion was officially forbidden, for fertility cults die hard (and Scandinavians tended, and still tend, to be most obedient to law in those provinces where the landscape is flat and the authorities can easily come out and control them).

The cult of the *landvaettir*, by the way, survived that of the greater deities during several centuries. The practice, still in use in this century, to offer Santa a bowl of rice porridge at Christmas is an example, since the dress of the giver of Christmas presents in Scandinavia today (roughly the same as that of Santa Claus in North America, if you remove the white edging at the bottom of his cap, which according to the latest historical theories was introduced in the 1930:s by the Coca-Cola Company in their advertise-ments, to give him their colours) has nothing to do with the bishop's dress of Santa Claus in Central Europe, but is taken from the Nordic brownie (whose dress and cap were grey, though).

Old Norse Ethics

Important to Old Norse morality was honour, and family solidarity. The position of women was probably stronger in pre-Christian times than it was to be later. In farmers' families, the work of both husband and wife were necessary for survival; and in vikings' families, the wife had to take charge of the houshold while her husband was abroad.

Divorce was permitted. So was polygyny, provided that the husband was rich enough to support several wives.

To revenge a killed family member was regarded as a sacred duty (a practice well known also much later from nominally Christian environments, as should be well known by anyone who has read *Huckleberry Finn*). Honour was held superior to life, and stealing as a worse crime than murder. To die in battle was honourable. Dying in bed of old age was not quite accepted, and was supposed to lead to a less pleasant life after death, but for an active viking the risk was slight.

All this, of course, meant that Old Norse culture was quite violent - but so was European Christendom of the same period. The change of religion from "Ancient Practice" to Christianity is often depicted by Christians as a lessening of violence, but that wasn't necessarily so. The first Christian kings in Scandinavia, including those who were later canonized, were warlords and mass murderers, not to say terrorrists, just as their predecessors.

The most common punishments for crimes committed were fines, forced exile and outlawry. A criminal forced into exile was safe (well, about as safe as law-abiding citizens, which wasn't very much) in other countries than his own, but if he was outlawed, information was spread to all Nordic rulers. Such a criminal had slight chances to survive very long, but still their was a difference between pre-Christian outlawry and the formal death penalty that was introduced together with Christianity. Any person was free to kill an outlaw, but the authorities didn't employ an executioner to do it for him. They didn't even lock the outlaw up. He was free, and probably armed, so the do-it-yourself executioner took a personal risk if he wished to satisfy his hatred. He couldn't just push a button, still less let someone else push it.

This had a connection with Old Norse people's high appreciation of courage. To kill a person who is locked in is not very courageous, compared to killing a strong man who is free and armed. If you were prepared to die for your conviction, you were respected even by those who didn't agree with you, and who possibly killed you; and if you managed to crack a joke when they did it, they would honour you posthumously even more.

(There were cases when forced outlaws managed to survive. To mention an example the cause for Eiríkr Raudhi, mentioned in the past chapter, to found a

colony in Greenland was the fact that he had been sentenced to three years of outlawry.)

Christian writers have often compared after-life of the two religions, and placed the fighting and feasting in Valhalla at the side of the more spiritual joys in Christian heaven. They have missed an important ethical point: Valhalla was not held to be eternal. It was a parallel not of Christian heaven, but of the intermediate state between death and resurrection believed in by many Christians (though not by all). The final goal for the heroes in Valhalla was not to go on feasting, or to enjoy any other kind of eternal life, but to finally fight and fall at the side of the gods in a last battle of light against darkness. This might be a less pleasant prospect than heaven, but I can't see it's morally inferior.

Old Norse culture was also very individualistic, at least for those individuals to happened to be family fathers. States were new and week in Scandinavia, and non-existent in Iceland, where each estate owner was his own master.

This does not mean, as Professor Björn Collinder believed when writing his preface to his Swedish translation of Snorri's Edda, that Iceland was an anarchy; for the word *anarchy*, though often misused by non-anarchists (or "archists", to use the word in Ursula LeGuin's "The Dispossessed"), means "class-less society", in Greek *an-arche*, and the Icelandic estate owners were keeping thralls, so class society existed very much.

It was not quite as extreme as in the South, though. The vikings rowed their ships themselves - they did not use galley-slaves - which means they could work in groups and show self-discipline when needed.

The Old Norse view of class society is given in the story of Heimdallr's wanderings, how he sired with three different women the three sons Thraell, Karl and Jarl, who became the fathers of the three estates - thralls, free-born, and high-born. Of course this meant that Old Norse religion regarded some people as inferior to others; but there were other sides to the matter as well. The three estates were actually regarded as brothers - albeit unequal brothers - and a point often missed is that the thralls were regarded as descendents of the eldest brother; which is something quite different from the Indian idea of the Brahmins being born from Brahma's head and the Shudras (servants) from his feet.

(It might be remarked in this connection that the coupling of [freedom,] equality and brotherhood, as printed on the banknotes of such an extremely unequal country as France, is not common to all cultures. In an Indo-Arian language like Sinhalese, for example, there is not in common use any word for "brother" as a general concept. One has to elect between *ayya* and *malli*, depending on whether the brother is older or younger than oneself; so there brotherhood is hierarchical.)

But of course, even if the thrall was theologically regarded as the free mans big brother, that didn't necessarily mean that he was decently treated in practice, in the

same way that official Christian ethics has not always prevented Christian slave owners from beating their servants.

Some thralls were born in Scandinavia, but some were bought or captured abroad, and of those some were again sold to Arabs and others. This slave trade was economically important especially for the Swedes. I don't know whether the words "slave" and "slav" are etymologically connected, but many Viking slaves *were* slavs, since especially the Swedish vikings passed Slavic areas.

Same as in most slave societies female thralls were, if attractice enough, used sexually by their owners. In most Nordic areas the child of a free man and a thrall woman was regarded as free-born. If a thrall was slain or wounded, his owner could not demand more compensation than the price he had paid for the thrall. (The thrall himself and his family didn't get any compensation at all, of course.)

It is true that the vikings abroad used violence, if peaceful means turned up not to be profitable enough. This example of theirs (and, to be sure, of earlier cultures) has been followed long after they and their religion passed away, and more efficiently when technology advanced. Ask the Amerindians...

Ethnically motivated violence was however, as far as we know, never practiced by the vikings. Nor did they, by torture or by threat of killing them, force others to embrace their own religion. (Until they had themselves been converted to Christianity. Then they did.) Ideology, and thereby religious fanaticism, came with Christianity. Snorri Sturluson, who was himself a Christian, has described the cruelty of his co-religionists very vividly in his tales of the Norwegian kings.

The vikings killed for honour or for money, not to exterminate other peoples. They were bullies, but they were not fanatics. One might compare the violence of the non-Christian vikings with that of the Christian conquistadors half a millennium later. The former did not destroy whole cultures. The latter did.

A new-born child did not have an absolute right to live. The house-father decided whether it should be taken care of, or put out in the wilderness to die as a kind of post-natal abortion. It is an interesting fact that when the free men of Iceland (the only Nordic country to decide this matter by vote instead of being forced) decided to abandon the "Ancient Practice" and embrace "Christian Practice" (they didn't describe Christianity as a faith), this usage was *not* abolished.

It is possible that old people, who could not take care of themselves any more, were either killed or encouraged to commit suicide; but this, again, is not quite certain.

The gods were not regarded as infallible, so human mistakes were no moral disaster. Betrayal and perjury were however (although the gods themselves were said to have committed it), and so was desecration of holy places; which may - same as in ancient Rome - have been the actual cause of "persecution" of Christians.

Regarding work, the *Hávamál* song of the Poetic Edda praises industry. It is true that Tacitus had, at his time, described the Germanic peoples as "habitually lazy"; but since he was a Roman, the Germanic peoples were his enemies (even if respected ones), so he wasn't quite impartial.

In any case, survival by agriculture in Northern Europe without either modern machines or diligent work is hardly possible; nor is rowing a ship across the North Sea a lazy task.

The Gods

The gods in Old Norse religion belonged to two different classes: the *aesir* and the *vanir*. The *aesir* were much connected to power and warfare, the *vanir* to fertility. It is possible that the *vanir* were worshipped earlier than the *aesir*. In any case, there is a myth about a war in old times between *aesir* and *vanir*. When peace was made, both parties sent hostages to each other, and the *vanir* most worshipped during the Viking Age were those supposed to live as hostage among the *aesir*. In general, the group of *vanir* seems to be relatively homogenous, while the *aesir* were much more varied.

The Old Norse gods were not regarded as immortal. In that respect, they are more similar to the Buddhist view of devas than to the gods of some other religions. Most of them, including all the important ones, are going to perish with this world at *ragnarökr*, "twilight of the gods". Some of the less important ones in this age will survive, though, and become important in the next; and Baldr, who has died already in this age, will then come back to life.

Aesir

Thórr

A common thing to Indo-European religions seems to be the high position given to the god of thunder. Among the Greek he was the chief god, named *Zeus*; so he became for the Romans, when their *Iuppiter* was identified with Father Zeus (*Zeus Pater*). In India, their are ancient texts describing the thunder-god *Indra* as supreme among the gods, but in modern Hinduism, their is hardly any cult around him. Other gods have taken his place in popular piety.

A similar evolution may have taken place among the Germanic peoples. It is possible that the thunder-god - Donar for the Germans, Thunor for the Anglo-Saxons, Thórr for the Nordics - once was regarded as the supreme god, but at the time the Eddas were written, he was supposed to be one of the sons of the war-god Odhinn, who was than the master of the pantheon.

Thórrs mother was supposed to be the earth itself (*Jordh*, in this role also called *Fjorgynn*), which makes him similar to Kronos of the Greek (by the Romans identified with Saturnus), who was sun of Gaia (the earth) and Ouranos (the sky); but Kronos was the thunder-gods father, not the thunder-god himself. (Kronos the titan should, by the way, not to be confused - though many learned authors do it - with Chronos, the god of time.)

Thórr was one of the most important gods in the cult, worshipped by farmers and seafarers. He was the most important one at least in Iceland, and among those

Norsemen who invaded the British isles, where he had a sacred oak-forest outside Dublin. In the Upsala temple there were three images, of which the central one was Thórr's, with the ones of Odhinn and Freyr on both sides.

Thórr was the god most involved in the myths. Physically, he was red-haired, red-bearded, and red-eyed (perhaps as associated with thunder, and thus with fire; or maybe because of his fondness for mead - much mead). Mentally, he was simple-minded, but strong, outspoken and indomitable. He had iron gloves and a girdle of strength, but it seems the girdle did not create its energy from nothing, for Thórr could scare even the giants with his capacity to eat and drink.

His weapon, and his attribute, was the thunderbolt (cf. Zeus' thunderbolt and Indra's *vajra*) in the form of a hammer called *Mjollnir*, "Crusher". This he used in a never ceasing war against giants and other evil forces (cf., in old Indian mythology, the constant conflict between Indra and the *asuras*). It was better than boomerangs (which the vikings most probably had never seen anyway), because it would return to the thrower even if it *had* hit, which it always did, and it was not good to be hit by.

Thórr was the great defender not only of Asgardhr, the dwelling of the *aesir*, but also of mankind (*alda bergr*). In the cult, images of Thórr's hammer were used for blessing newborn babies and newly wedded brides, possibly also at funerals. When Christian missionaries came to the North, Thórr's hammer was used as a symbol for the old religion, same as the cross for the new.

Thórr's animals were two he-goats, named *Tanngjnóstr* ("Teeth-Gnasher") and *Tanngrisnir* ("Teeth-Barer"). They served two purposes: they drew his carriage and they could, in a pinch, be butchered and eaten, whereupon one collected their bones and put them in their skins, and the next day they were alive and fit for fight again. Very useful.

Thórrs father was Odhinn, his mother was the Earth, his wife was Sif, his sons were Módhi ("Furious") and Magni ("Strong"), his daughter was Thrúdhr. His estate was called *Thrúdhvangar*, "Fields of Strength", but he was seldom there, busy as he was travelling eastwards to *Jotunheimr*, the country of the giants, and killing its inhabitants.

When Cristianity had replaced the old religion, Thórr was one of the gods who survived (unofficially) as Christian saints. In my own home province, the island of Gotland (if you look at a map of the Baltic Sea you can't miss it), most churches are medieval. They usually had three altars each - one high altar, one altar to Saint Mary, and one to Saint Olaf (i. e. Olaf Haraldsson, a Norwegian king who by an extreme use of violence introduced the mild god of the Christians in Norway, in Gotland and in parts of Sweden and possibly parts of Russia; after his death, shortly before the Catholic church split off from the Orthodox one, he was duly regarded as a saint by both, but that was before the function of the Devil's Advocate had been

invented). The image of Saint Olaf was often remarkably similar to old images of Thórr, the cult of which he was supposed to have abolished. (It is to be supposed that the Holy Virgin would also serve as proxy for the not very virgin goddess Freyja.)

Thórr has given his name to Thursday, who in Romance languages is named after Iuppiter (e. g. French *jeudi*).

Odhinn

Odhinn was the supreme god of classical Old Norse religion. His father was Burr, who was son of Búri, who came into being when the primeval cow Audhhumbla licked some frost-covered, salty stones. Odhinn's wife was Frigg, but as supreme god he had a lot of children and was, to use an understatement, not quite monogamous - same as Zeus of the Greek. He is said to have children with Njordhr's wife Skadhi, and with several others. The mother of Odhinn's son Thórr, Jordh (Earth), might have been identical with Frigg, but one can't quite trust it. (Only among gods, the *mother's* identity may be uncertain...)

Odhinn, lord of the battle-field, was the chief war-god, but not the only one. He was a peculiar general, though, because he was also *yggjungr ása*, "the brooder among gods", god of poetry as well as of warfare - he was said to have invented the runes - and eager to achieve wisdom, for the purpose of which he once sacrificed one of his eyes, and/or hanged himself, as described in *Hávamál* 138-139:

I know that I hung
on the wind-battered tree
nine full nights,
wounded with the spear
and given to Odhinn,
myself to myself,
on that tree
of which none knows
whence the roots came.
They did not comfort me with the loaf
nor with the drinking horn,
I glanced down;
I took up the runes,
crying out their names,
I fell back down from there.

(translation cited from Dumézil: "Gods of the Ancient Northmen", chapter 2

translated by John Lindow.)

So he was also the god of the hanged, and in a way of the dead in general, or at least of those who died with honour. Unlike most lords of the dead, though, he was himself regarded as mortal.

Odhinn was an expert of Old Norse shamanism, called *seidhr*, by which he could know the fate of men and predict events to come. He could also kill by *seidhr*, or inflict misfortunes or illnesses, or deprive people of wits or strength and give it to others. He could go freely and in no time between the worlds in the shape of bird or beast, fish or dragon, while his own body lay as if asleep. By mere words he could extinguish fires, calm the sea, and turn the winds as he wished, or open the earth or the mountain or a burial mound and bind those who dwelled there, and then he could go in and take what he wanted as an expert burglar. He was also able to wake up the dead and force them to tell him what they knew - the whole of the first Edda poem *Völuspá*, "the Seeress' Prophecy", and many stanzas in another Edda poem called *Baldrs draumar*, "the Dreams of Baldr", are supposed to be the words of dead searesses thus forced, and his faithful counsellor is said to be Mímir's (se below)) chopped-off head.

This shamanistic talent of the high god might have been an uncomplicated affair in other cultures; but among the Norsemen, shamanism was a female monopoly - "this sorcery is attended by such wickedness that manly men considered it shameful to practice it, and so it was taught to priestesses", to cite Hollander's translation of Snorri's *Heimskringla* (pp. 10-11). Although women in pre-Christian Northern Europe did have a relatively strong position, the vikings were not quite devoid of machismo.

In short, Odhinn's personality was quite complicated, not to say schizophrenic. He was the psychological opposite of Thórr. He was something as unusual as a supreme god with a chronic bad conscience, having at several occasions broken sacred oaths, and thereby contributing much to the corruption of the divine world.

The big mistake of Odhinn's life was to enter a sworn brotherhood with the born giant and adopted god Loki, who helped the gods when the world was young (at one time, he transformed himself into a female horse and gave birth to Odhinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir), but who later turned out to be completely evil and arranged the death of the very good god Baldr, so Odhinn was forced either to abandon his pursuit of good or to break his oath (which might be why the world looks like it does). At *ragnarökr* Odhinn will lead the forces of good, and Loki the armies of evil; they will then both die.

If Thórr was the god of thunder, Odhinn was master of the storm-gale, known to lead the "wild hunt" of departed souls when a tempest is blowing. (The Old German form of the name Odhinn was *Wuotan*, which is etymologically connected

to modern German *Wut*, "fury".)

Odhinn's weapon was the spear called *Gungnir*. His animals were the eight-legged horse *Sleipnir*, who could run on ground or in the air; the two ravens *Huginn* (thought) and *Muninn* (memory), who flew across the world each morning and reported to him each noon, as a kind of primordial spy satellites; and the two wolves *Geri* and *Freki* ("ravener" and "greed").

Odhinn's estate is called Valhalla (*Valholl*), "Hall of the Slain". It is filled with shields and coats of mail, it is guarded by wolves and eagles, and it has hundreds of doors through which the warriors can rapidly get out at any threat of attack - and they will do so at least at *ragnarökr*. In this hall, Odhinn receives fifty percent of those men who have been happy enough to die in battle (Freyja - see about her in the next chapter - takes the other half).

In Valhalla these fallen ones, called *einherjar* ("unique warriors") , have a mighty good time, fighting each other all day to be resurrected, if necessary, each evening and enjoy a sumptuous supper, drinking mead that is milked from a goat called *Heidhrún* and eating the pork of a boar called *Saehrímnír*, who - same as Thórr's he-goats - is resurrected each time he has been eaten, as fat as before and ready to be butchered again. (What a life for a domesticated animal!)

Their joy is not eternal, though. When comes *ragnarökr*, the last battle of this age between good and evil, they will fight for the good and fall, as will both Odhinn, Thórr, and many others.

Tyr

Odhinn, the supreme war-god, has given his name to Wednesday; but in Romance languages (e. g. French *mercredi*) that day is named after Mercurius, identified with the Greek god Hermes, who was an entirely different personality with a quite different function. (Even if Hermes guided the dead to Hades, he was not their lord; and besides, Hades was more similar to Hel than to Valhalla, and those who went to Valhalla were supposed to be guided by the valkyries, not by Odhinn himself. If Hermes - god of merchants and thieves - is similar to any character in Old Norse mythology, it is rather to Odhinn's foster-brother Loki, at least at the latter's early stages as naughty rather than downright evil.) In Romance languages, the name of the war-god (Greek *Ares*, Latin *Mars*) is given to Tuesday (e. g. French *mardi*).

Now, the English word Tuesday, and the corresponding name in other Teutonic languages, is derived from Tyr, who was also a war-god, and possibly older than Odhinn, who later may have surpassed him. Actually, an old Germanic form of the name Tyr was *Tiwaz*, which is etymologically related to Sanskrit *Dyaus* and Greek *Zeus* (and, by Jove, to his Roman analogue), so he might have been quite high in pre-historical times. In the Viking Age, Odhinn was worshipped by the officers, but

simple soldiers often preferred Tyr.

There a relatively few myths about Tyr. The most well-known one is the story how he lost his hand to a wolf called Fenrir, whose mother (!) was the male giant Loki - well, if that sounds complicated, you will find the story later in this book.

At one place in the Poetic Edda, Tyr mentions the giant Hymir as his father, but *aesir* as a rule did not have giants as fathers. Probably his real father was supposed to be Odhinn, and his mother possibly Hymir's wife. Odhinn, same as Zeus of the Greek (or even the Holy Ghost of the Christians, although he is said to have done it only once), had no qualms about making children with other men's women.

Heimdallr

Heimdallr is called "the white *áss*". He is said to be "born of nine mothers" - possibly nine female giants who turned the world-mill, and thereby created him, or possibly the nine daughters of the sea-god Aegir - thus the waves of the sea, from which he was born. He was born *í árdaga*, "at the beginning of time"; and at *ragnarökr*, he will be the last of the gods doomed to die to do so. His estate is called Himinbjorg, and is about the skies.

In a myth it is told how he became father of the three estates - higborn, freeborn, and thralls - but in the opposite order, which means the servants are descendants of the *oldest* brother, and thus the god's primary inheritors. But he doesn't seem to have had any cult, so the upper classes may not have taken that thought too seriously.

Heimdallr is the guardian of the gods, sitting tirelessly and guarding the rainbow bridge *Bifrost*. He never sleeps, his eye-sight is as sharp night as day, his ear can discern the tiniest sound. At times of danger he can alert the aesir by blowing in his *Gjallarhorn*, the "resounding horn". This he will do a last time, when *ragnarökr* is about to begin. He will then kill Loki, and be killed by him.

Baldr

Baldr was son of Odhinn and Frigg, husband of Nanna and father of Forseti. He was the best of the *aesir*. It was impossible to say anything bad about him. He was very wise, but his judgments were not headed. (Already at that time, it was obvious from the state of the world that wisdom does not have much power, and the power is not very wise.)

Little else is said about Baldr except one myth to be told later in this book, and there he didn't do very much except to be killed at Loki's instigation (but being killed is, of course, a sufficiently exceptional thing for a god).

Some pious Christians believe the mildness of Baldr to be due to Christian

influence. I doubt it. The gospels don't describe Jesus as very mild, and the Christians in Europe during the Viking Age definitively weren't. Still, Baldr is a peculiar character in the Old Norse pantheon, at least during the last centuries of the old religion. He may have been different earlier.

After *ragnarökr* and the death of Odhinn his father, and of many other gods and men, Baldr will come back from the land of the dead and rule the new world.

Hodhr

Hodhr was brother of Baldr. He was blind. In the myth about Baldr's death, it was Hodhr who was cheated by Loki to shoot the arrow that killed his brother. It was not made intentionally, but according to Old Norse ethics, the killing still had to be revenged; so a newborn son of Odhinn's, Váli, begotten specifically for this purpose, killed Hodhr. The brothers seem to have been reconciled on the other side, though, for after *ragnarökr*, Hodhr is also one of the gods who will return.

Ullr

Great skier (or perhaps walker on snow-shoes, and maybe skater as well) and bowman, known as "god of the shield" - he may have used his shield as a boat, for in Old Norse poetry a shield is sometimes called "ship of Ullr". His name is related to a Gothic word meaning "majesty". He is little mentioned in the myths, but he must have been very important earlier, for a lot of places in Sweden and Norway have been named after him. (Mental hospitals in Sweden are mostly named after Christian saints, but the one in Upsala is called Ulleråker, after the name of the lokal district. This was named after Ullr, who was there the object of much worship.) He was invoked by people who were about to duel. His estate was *Ydalir*, "yew grove" (the best bows were made of the wood from yews, and those trees were generally regarded as sacred).

Bragi

Poet of gods and god of poets, known for his wisdom and eloquence. As spokesman of Odhinn he welcomed famous heros, when fallen, to Valhalla. No myths about him have been preserved to our times, except for the Edda song *Lokasenna* where Loki insults all the gods, but Bragi more than any other, blaming him for cowardness in battle. Bragi's wife was Idhunn, who will be mentioned in the chapter about goddesses.

Vili and Vé/Hoenir and Lódhurr

The names Vili and Vé are mentioned as brothers of Odhinn in the myth about the creation of our world. Odhinn's two brothers are also named as Hoenir and Lódhurr. The two pairs may be identical, though the identity of Old Norse gods is a tricky matter - the Edda loves to use umpteen names for each, and it is often unclear exactly who is who. Gods don't have social security numbers.

The names Hoenir and Lódhurr figure especially in the story about the creation of Askr and Embla, the first human couple, when it is said that Odhinn gave them spirit, Hoenir intelligence and Lódhurr senses and form. Lódhurr hardly exists outside this story, but Hoenir is mentioned as one of the few gods who will survive *ragnarökr*, probably the only one of his generation. It is also mentioned that he and Mímir (se below) were sent to the *vanir* by the *aesir* as hostage, at the end of the war between the two groups of gods, and that Hoenir was there made chief, but that he was so uninterested in exercising power that the *vanir* got angry, decapitated his counsellor Mímir, and sent his head back to the *aesir*.

Snorri says that Hoenir is swift and long-legged. Poets named him friend of Odhinn and Loki, who were the two most psychologically complicated characters of Old Norse mythology. Hoenir was said to be silent, which in Nordic culture is (or at least was) not necessarily regarded as a bad thing. A silent man could get the reputation of being wise, which was much more difficult if he actually gave expression to his thoughts. (Says me, who am writing a book...)

Vídharr and Váli

Two sons of Odhinn's, mainly known as revengers. At *ragnarökr*, Vídharr will slay the wolf Fenrir, who has killed Odhinn.

Váli was begotten specifically to revenge the death of Baldr, a duty which he fullfilled by killing Hodhr at the somewhat tender age of one night, without having vasted any time on washing his hands or combing his hair. (According to contemporary witnesses, vikings were quite happy to abstain from washing.)

These two gods, together with Thórr's sons Magni and Módhi, will survive *ragnarökr* and their fathers.

Forseti

Son of Baldr and Nanna, god of justice. His estate is *Glitnir*, with golden pillars and silver roof, best court-house among gods and men, where he is said to still all strifes. Very just and (except in Frisia) little worshipped.

Mímir

Counsellor of the gods, said to be wisest of *aesir*. He really wasn't one of them, though, but a primeval giant. However, he was genuinely friendly to them (unlike Loki, the other giant living among gods). Mímir's well is pouring its water at the roots of the world-tree. This water brings wisdom, but not anyone is permitted to taste it. Even Odhinn could drink it only after sacrificing one of his eyes.

After the war between *aesir* and *vanir*, Mímir was given as hostage to the latter. Due to some misunderstanding he was then decapitated and his head sent back to the *aesir*, but Odhinn managed to bring it it back to life. It still gives him good advise, and it will continue to do so until *ragnarökr*.

There are several theories of the etymological background of the name Mímir (or Mímr, or Mimi, to mention two variations). Some have linked it to Latin *memor*, which in English has become "memory", and others to Old English *meotud*, "fate".

Aegir

Really also rather giant than *áss*, but friendly to the *aesir*, who often met in his hall to have a good drink. God of the sea. His wife was Rán. They had nine daughters, who may have been identical with the nine mothers of Heimdallr.

Thjálfi or Thjelvar

Possibly born human, but god at least by adoption. Mentioned in two myths from Iceland and one from Gotland. There may have been many more stories about him, now lost. His parents were, as told by Snorri in the Prose Edda, visited by Thórr, on whose he-goats they supped; but Thjálfi made the mistake of cleaving one bone to get the marrow, so when the goats were resurrected, one of them was lame. His parents compensated the infuriated god by giving him Thjálfi as servant, and as such he proved to be very useful.

When grown-up, Thjálfi (or Thjelvar, which is the Gotlandic form of his name) travelled to my home island and finally made it habitable, according to a text from the 13th century called the *Guta Saga*. Before that time, the island had the nasty habit of sinking under the waves each morning, and not rising again until evening; but Thjálfi brought fire to Gotland, and thereby he broke the spell. He is therefore especially dear to me and other Gotlanders, as our first countryman; and to all Scandinavian archaeologies as well, as Gotland is one of the most important sites of Nordic archaeology.

(It is told from a lesson in a Gotlandic school, not many decades ago, that the teacher of religion asked one boy: "Who was the first man?" The boy promptly

replied: "Thjelvar." The teacher, shocked, retorted: "But don't you know that Adam was still older?" "Well," the boy answered, "if you include mainlanders...")

The names of Thjálfi's parents are not mentioned, but his sister - who was given as servant to Thórr together with himself - was Roskva. His son was Hafthi, and his daughter-in-law was called Huítastierna ("White Star"). This couple were the first inhabitants of Gotland.

Whether this means that the family returned to human status, or that we Gotlanders are more or less divine, I am much too modest to say.

Vanir:

The *vanir* are mentioned in the myths as a group of gods more or less equal with the *aesir*, but only two male vanir are named (Freyr and Njordhr) and one female (Freyja), and all three are said to live among the *aesir* as hostage after the end of the war between the two groups. Possibly there were a lot of others known locally.

Freyr

Chief of the *vanir*, god of fertility, as such depicted with a certain anatomical detail which would make the Moral Majority blush. In the temple of Upsala, Freyr had his image beside the ones of Thórr and Odhinn, and his cult is said to have been the most interesting one. He was much worshipped by women.

In the cult to Freyr songs were sung, which have in our times been labelled "obscene" by scholars who should know better. The label is anachronistic. Sacred songs to a fertility god of a polytheistic religion may contain outspoken sexual allusions which may seem obscene to followers of ascetic and/or monotheistic religions like Christianity, but to the followers of that religion itself they are of course not.

Freyr decided when the sun should shine and when the rain should fall, and he gave fruitfulness ot the earth. He was also the god of love and peace, but his main attribute was the sword. This combination did not turn out to be easy. When Freyr fell in love with the giant maiden Gerdhr, he had to give his sword away for the privilege of meeting her. This will prove fatal at *ragnarökr*, when the lack of his sword will be his death.

Freyr figures very rarely in mythology - actually, the only known story about him is the one about his affair with Gerdhr - but Snorri called him "God of the World" (*veraldar gódh*).

Freyr's estate was called *Alfheimr*, so there seems to have been a close connection between *vanir* and elves. His animal was a golden boar called *Slídhrugtanni* or *Gullinborsti*, who could run on ground or in the air. His vehicle

was a ship called *Skídhbladhnir* (though Snorri in *Heimskringla* says this ship was owned by Odhinn). It was made by dwarves, and so cunningly constructed that it could, when not in use, be folded so neatly that one could put it in a pouch. When unfolded, it was of course full-sized, and could travel over both land and sea. In whatever direction it went, it always had a fair wind.

Freyr's father was Njordhr, his sister was Freyja.

Njordhr

God of ships, father of Freyr and Freyja, whose mother was his sister. (Among the southern Germanic peoples, there was a goddess called Nerthus, which is etymologically identical with Njordhr.) Later, he became the husband of Skadhi in a not quite happy marriage, because he loved the sea and she the mountains, and they couldn't stand each others favourite environments.

Njordhr controlled the paths of the winds, stilled the waves and fire, brought wealth to fishermen and seafarers, and was worshipped by sailors and merchants. He was rich enough to be able to give an abundance of land and property to those who prayed to him. His estate was called *Noatún* ("Enclosure of Ships").

The Goddesses

Vanir:

Freyja

The goddess most worshipped belonged to the *vanir*, which is the reason I have begun the description of the goddesses with them (the female *aesir* figure relatively rarely in cult and myth). She was goddess of love and fertility, daughter of Njordhr and sister of Freyr, possibly the latter's wife as well - sibling incest was prohibited to *aesir*, but not to *vanir*, according to Snorri. (Their mother was also said to be their father's sister.)

Freyja had to do with love between man and woman, and it was good to invoke her for help in such cases.

The day Friday may be named after Freyja, but some think it is after Odhinn's wife Frigg. There are great similarities between the two, although one belonged to the *vanir* and the other to the *aesir*. At one place in the Poetic Edda, it is said that Freyja had a husband called *Odhr*, which makes the parallel even stronger.

There is another connection between Freyja and Odhinn: when the latter takes half the fallen heroes, Freyja gets the rest, and receives them in her estate called Fólkvangar ("Fields of the People"). It was also Freyja who taught Odhinn the unmanly magic art of *seidhr*. Same as Odhinn and Loki, she could transform herself into a falcon to facilitate travel.

Freyja was much desired by the giants, who often tried to abduct her. Her animals were cats, who draw her carriage. Same as her brother Freyr, Freyja too had a boar. Hers was named *Hildisvín*, "Battle Pig". Her necklace was called *Brísingamen*, and was made by dwarves (as were so many of the gods' treasures).

Snorri claims that the Germanic word for Mrs or Madam - Old Norse *frú*, cf. modern High German *Frau* - comes from Freyja's name; but Snorri's linguistic theories are not always accepted without objections.

Skadhi

Born a giant, but adopted of the *vanir* when marrying Njordhr (after seeing only his feet and believing them to be Baldr's, so the marriage wasn't happy - take warning, girls!). Goddess of hunting.

Aesir:

Frigg

Odhinn's wife. May have given her name to Friday, if it wasn't Freyja. Venerated as mother goddess, but hardly figures in the myths. Frigg and Freyja together are said to help women about to give birth.

Sif

Thórr's wife. Little is known about her, except that she had a wonderful, golden hair.

Idhunn

Wife of Bragi, goddess of youth. Her apples prevented the gods from ageing.

The idea of life-giving apples can be found not only in Germanic mythology, but also in Celtic (e. g. Irish sagas) and Greek (the apples of the Hesperides), and it may have come from the Middle East. (Many pious Christians take for granted that the fruit from the tree of knowledge in Genesis, and possibly the fruit from the tree of life as well, was an apple, but nothing of the sort is said in the Bible - it might as well have been a banana - so the idea of the apple may very well have been imported from other religions.)

Nanna

Baldr's wife. It is told that when Baldr had died and was about to be cremated, her heart burst and she died, so she was put on the same funeral pyre. They both went to Hel together, and they will both return at *ragnarökr*, together with Baldr's brother and immediate killer Hodhr.

Rán

Sea goddess, wife of Aegir. Drowned people go to Rán. If you do that, you should preferably not be empty-handed, so it is good to carry some golden object when travelling by sea, for all eventualities.

Others:

The Norns

There may seem to be a solid male dominance among the Old Norse gods - and in the myths there was - but the supreme powers were female: the three norns

(*nornir*), the goddesses of fate (similar to the *moirai* of the Greek). Their names were Urdhr, Verdandi, and Skuld. These names have several interpretations. They may mean past, present, and future; or fate, becoming, and necessity. The norns are said to sit by their well at the root of the world-tree and spin a thread for each human being, the length of the thread corresponding to the length of his or her life. The gods meet daily at their well to disuss their problems, but neither gods nor men can escape the norns' ultimate decisions.

Dwarves, Elves, and Sundry

Dwarves

Dwarves are born in earth like worms. They live in mounds and rocks as guardians of great riches, and they avoid daylight (some rich people still do). The dwarves were skilled artisans and smiths, running a kind of primeval Silicon Valley and making some of the gods' most advanced hightech gadgets such as Thórr's hammer, Odhinn's spear, and Freyr's ship. (Hightech existed in mythology millennia before it entered the real world - you can find descriptions of robots already in the Iliad.)

In Old Norse mythology the sky is not carried by one giant, like Atlas of the Greek, but by four dwarves, simply named North, South, East and West (an early example of Scandinavian collectivism?).

Elves

The elves (*álfar)* could almost be regarded as a third class of gods, alongside with the *aesir* and the *vanir*. Sacrifices were made to the elves as well, especially in private cult - the yearly elf-sacrifice may have been the beginning of Yule, with customs still characterizing the Nordic way of celebrating Christmas (which is still called *jul*, perhaps because Christ never really managed to enter it). At several places in Sweden there are bowl-shaped pits, called "elf-mills", on rocks, often together with sun-wheels. In such pits, milk has been offered to elves as late as our century.

The elves were connected with the *vanir* - Freyr's estate was called *Alfheimr* - and both with the sun. (When J. R. R. Tolkien in his hobbit saga, much inspired by several mythologies including Old Norse, talks about a deep enmity between elves and dwarves, he may have had in mind that in Old Norse belief the elves, or at least the light-elves, were oriented towards the sun, while the dwarves were said to shun it.)

There were two main groups of álfar: the light-elves, living in a celestial abode, and the black-elves, living under the earth, perhaps connected with the dwarves.

Dísir

The *dísir* were a group of nameless goddesses. They were dedicated an extensive worship, probably very old, and were connected with fertility and Freyja (one of whose side-names was *Vanadís*, "the *dís* of the *vanir*). A public cult of the *dísir* had its centre in Upsala. The sacrifice to the dísir took place around the spring equinox in Upsala, but in Norway and Iceland in the middle of October.

The *dísir* were regarded as patrons of the individual family, and were specially close to the family head. Their activities were often connected to warfare, but they were not quite reliable. (Same as Odhinn, by the way. Quite natural for war divinities, since the outcome of a war can never be trusted, so perhaps you shouldn't start one.) If you stumble on your way to battle, you have been doomed by the dísir and can expect a certain defeat.

Valkyries

The valkyries (*valkyrjur*) were divine female warriors, more or less identical with the *dísir* in their warlike aspect. At an early stage, they were regarded as demons of death and carnage, who devoured the corpses on the battlefield (similar to the furies of the Greek). In later myths, they were reinterprated to be the servants of Odhinn, riding fully armoured with helmets and spears to witness battle, and to point out what warriors were to fall and go to Valhalla. There they also served as their waitresses - an interesting combination of duties.

Fylgias

The fylgias ("followers") were a kind of female guardian angels, connected to the family and usually inherited from father to son. (Women didn't seem to have any fylgias. Perhaps they didn't need them.) If your fylgia leaves you, your chances will be very slim indeed, both in this life and in the hereafter, for she will do that only if you have behaved extremely bad; so please take care!

Landvaettir

The highest divinities are not always those most worshipped. Many Catholics feel more comfortable communicting with their favourite saints than going directly to God, and the negative attitude of the Protestant reformers towards this habit may well have accelerated the coming of a post-Christian age.

Same among the Old Norse peoples. Odhinn was high, and much praised by the poets, but worshipped mainly by the big brass. For peaceful seafarers and farmers, Thórr was more important as god of sky and thunder, and for everyday use one especially worshipped the *vanir* and elves, and tried to please the land-gnomes (*landvaettir*). All three categories seem to have been more or less connected to fertility, and indeed the borderlines between them are not always quite clear.

The vikings often adorned their ships with a dragon head in the stem. In the pre-Christian law of Iceland it was ordered that such heads should be removed before the ship could be sighted from land. Elseway they might scare the *landvaettir*.

If the *dísir* were patrons of the individual family, the *landvaettir* protected the country or the district, sometimes just a single farm. They were many, but nameless, and they lived in different places in nature, such as mountains, groves, mounds, and waterfalls, or just underground.

The *landvaettir* could be of great help if they felt good, bringing good fortune in farming, hunting and fishing, as well as protecting children and animals; but if they were not well treated, the area under their responsibility was in for problems.

Unlike the higher deities, they very much survived the change of religion. In Gotland, *di sma undar jårdi* ("the small ones under the earth") are still figuring in local tales; and there are still farms in Scandinavia where the brownie shall be given, each year at Christmas, a bowl of rice-porridge with milk and butter. (An interesting choice of offering, since rice can't be cultivated in Northern Europe and has to be imported. Cf., in Indian tradition, the story of how the Buddha-to-be, when sitting under a tree, as his last meal before attaining enlightenment was offered milk-rice by a maiden, who misstook him for the tree-gnome!)

In the end of the 19th century, the Swedish author Viktor Rydberg and painter Jenny Nyström started the transformation of the brownie from a helpful but tricky farm-hand into a giver of Christmas presents. In the USA and some other countries, Santa Claus has taken off his bishop's robe (which he still is wearing in e. g. the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland), and adopted, with somewhat enhanced colours (red instead of grey) the dressing of this "Christianized" - which in this case means commercialized - land-gnome.

Giants and Other Forces of Evil

Giants (*iotnar* or *thursar*)

Unlike some ethnical religions, the Old Norse one seems to have made a quite clear distinction between good and evil (although not all other religions would agree with it where to draw the borderline between the two). Among giants, there were some who were friendly to the gods and benevolent to mankind, but most were on the other side, including the primeval one - Ymir.

Later giants lived mainly in *Jotunheimr*, east of the world of men called *Midhgardhr*. (Nothing political - the Russians were not very powerful when this myth was created. The Swedish 19th century author Viktor Rydberg, who was a great scholar of Old Norse religion with several still controversial theories, moved *Jotunheimr* from east to north, though; whether from climatological or political reasons, I don't know.) From time to time, the giants try to invade the worlds of gods and men. They are constant enemies of Thórr, and thus play a similar role as the asuras in ancient Indian mythology.

Ymir or Aurgelmir

The first anthropomorphic being. At the same time as the first theriomorphic being, the primeval cow Audhhumbla, he appeared spontaneously when heat and cold met. From his body, and from those of his son and grandson, our world was made by the first gods, who had killed them.

Thrúdhgelmir

Son of Ymir, born by one of his feet which had been fertilized by the other. At the same time, two other giants - one male and one female - were born from his armpit. Thrúdhgelmir had six heads.

Bergelmir

Son of Thrúdhgelmir, born in a similar manner as he.

Surtr

Ruler of *Myrkvidhr*, the southern part of *Utgardhr* (from which J. R. R. Tolkien pinched the name "Mirkwood".). At *ragnarökr*, he will kill Freyr.

Thjazi

Father of Skadhi, posthumous father-in-law of Njordhr. A giant who tried, with Loki's help, to bereave the gods of Idhunn and her apples. He was then killed by Thórr, who threw the dead giant's eyes into the sky, where the are still to be seen as two bright stars, not clear which ones (possibly Castor and Pollux?).

Skrymir or Utgardhar-Loki

The owner of a large estate in Utgardhr, visited by Thórr in a famous story told later in this book.

Hymir

A sea giant, foster-father of Tyr (whose real father was supposed to be Odhinn, but whose mother may have been Hymir's wife), visited by him and Thórr, fishing with the latter and getting the Midhgardhr Serpent on the hook, which Thórr liked but Hymir did not, then unwilling (and, by help of Thórr's hammer, posthumous) deliverer of a big pot to Aegir.

Hrungnir

The owner of a good horse, on which he competed with Odhinn on Sleipnir, which led to complications and ultimately to his death. The story will be told later in this book.

Thrymr

A giant who once stole Thórr's hammer, with an end result which turned out to be just too bad for himself.

Gymir

Father of Gerdhr, with whom Freyr once fell in love, which led to the loss of the latter's sword.

Loki

Most cunning of all giants, and almost as psychologically complicated among them as Odhinn among the gods. He managed to infiltrate the world of gods and enter a

sworn brotherhood with the latter. For a beginning, he was smart enough to help the *aesir* now and then, but later his true character shone through.

Loki instigated the killing of the good god Baldr, and even made impossible a try to get him back from the country of the dead, which might otherwise have succeeded - the death-goddess had promised to let Baldr come back if every single being would weep over him, and one single being refused.

After that, even Odhinn would not keep his oath to Loki any longer (not that Odhinn was quite reliable anyway - war-gods seldom are). The *aesir* then captured Loki and locked him into a cave, fettered with the intestines of his own son (it seems that the good powers are not always less cruel than the evil ones). Over Loki they placed a snake, who lets his venom drop in his face. His faithful wife Sigyn (well, really bad prisoners in real life still get a lot of letters from romantic girls) is holding a bowl over him to catch the venom, but now and then she has to empty it.

Then the venom falls straight into the face of Loki, who shudders mightily from pain; and that is the cause of earthquakes. (Californians could try to find the place...)

When Loki will finally be free again, *ragnarökr* is near; but he will not survive that final battle.

Loki, however, has the great merit of making a good story out of Old Norse mythology. The main characters of the myths are Thórr, Odhinn, and him. Most other gods figure in one or two myths each, or none at all. Loki, on the other hand, acts together with most of the others. (Freyr may be an exception, since he is not mentioned in the myth about him and Gerdhr; but Gerdhr was a giant, so who knows?)

Loki was a master of changing his shape, including his - or (grammar is a complicated matter in such cases) her - sex. In that way, (s)he became actually mother of several beings. One of them was Odhinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir, which is of great use to the *aesir* and will actually fight his parent at *ragnarökr*. Three other offspring of Loki, less loved by the gods, are the Midhgardhr Serpent, the wolf Fenrir, and the death-goddess Hel.

Other Evil Forces

The Midhgardhr Serpent (*Midhgardhsormr*)

An offspring of Loki, born small as snakes use to, but rapidly growing, thrown into the sea by the gods and continuing to grow until his body lies round all the continents. Thórr has tried to kill him a couple of times, withour success. At *ragnarökr*, they will kill each other.

Fenrir

A wolf born by Loki. As a cub much liked by the *aesir*, who loved to play with him, but when he was full-grown, even they got scared of him. By tricks they managed to make him try a dwarf-made kind of fetter, much stronger than it looked. To make him trust they wouldn't hurt him, which they would, Tyr put his hand in the mouth of Fenrir, who promptly bit it off when he found he had been cheated. Too bad for Tyr, but too late for Fenrir, who will have to wear these fetters until *ragnarökr*.

Hel

Death-goddess, daughter of Loki. Her place is also called Hel, and is pure hell - that's actually what the English word comes from. The only person who is getting a nice treatment at her place is probably Baldr, who came there because of other's treachery and not by his own faults (but unlike Christ, he can't leave after just three days - he will have to stay until *ragnarökr* and his father's death).

Otherwise, her guests are mostly perjurors and other dishonoured people. Her country is situated in the north (which would mean somewhere between Norway and the North Pole). Noisy rivers surround it. The river Gjall is border between the quick and the dead. The unblessed dead has to cross it by the bridge called *Gjallarbrú*, "echoing bridge". Its entrance is guarded by a giant dog, whose breast is dripping with blood. (Cf., in Greek mythlogy, the river Styx and the dog Kerberos!) Ms. Hel herself has a face with the blue colour of corpses.

The Myths

The Sources

Less has been written about Old Norse religion than about the one of the Greek. One reason for this is that written sources are more scarce. Old Norse literate culture evolved much later than Mediterranean. Papyrus didn't grow in the North, and parchment was expensive. (One reason that runes look like they do, with all strokes straight and either vertical or diagonal, never horizontal, is the fact that they were for the most part carved in wood, with the lines running parallel to the grain.) Nordic literature was mainly oral. Besides, after the introduction of Christianity, the Church in Scandinavia - where it owned its position to violence - did everything it could to obliterate all traces of the "Ancient Practice".

In Iceland, far from Scandinavia but with Scandinavian culture, it didn't. There, the decision to change religion was taken peacefully in the year 1000 by vote, and the change was less brutal. (Though some thought baptism to be cruel enough - it was made by immersion in a stream called Öxará, which was pretty cold, and bathing may not have been there favourite pastime.) Publice sacrifice to the old gods was forbidden, but private cult was still permitted (at least during the first few years), provided it was done in secret. For the Icelanders, the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch in Constantinople were far away.

(The formal introduction of Christianity was made a few decades before the final split between the two in 1054, so it is not correct to say that the first Christian community in Northern Europe was Roman Catholic. There were also tight connections between Upsala and Novgorod, and Russian artists worked in Nordic churches long after the split, which evidently wasn't taken seriously at our latitudes for a long time.)

The Icelanders were also quite literate, as good at writing as at fighting. They've kept that tradition for a thousand years (perhaps because there is not much other entertainment in the Icelandic countryside). Icelandic literature is still vital, in spite of the fact that the language is spoken only by some hundred thousands of people, and not understood by others. (As for fighting - well, when I studied in Upsala in the sixties, Gotlandic and Icelandic students stuck together, so I got to know them a bit. They were good at chess as well.) Anyhow, the Icelanders didn't want to loose the literary opportunities offered by the old stories, so they kept them alive.

The most important sources of Old Norse religion are therefore Icelandic. The language is Old Norwegian, as it is still correctly called in Norway - the old name was *noroena tunga*, "Norwegian Tongue", or even *dönsk tunga*, "Danish Tongue", since the difference was still negligible. In some other countries it is misleadingly called Old Icelandic, although no Icelandic language existed at that time. (It could

be argued that it still doesn't. The modern language in Iceland is still very close to Old Norwegian, but modern Norwegian is half Danish, and half the glossary of modern Danish - and Swedish - is Low German; so if anyone has stopped speaking Norwegian it is the Norwegians, not the Icelanders.)

Old Norse prose tended to be very straightforward - if the Swedish medieval laws are just translated into modern language phrase by phrase, they are much easier to understand than the ones our parliament is passing today (our political rhetorics came under French dominance a couple of centuries ago, with stylistically disastrous effects). Old Norse poetry on the other hand, although the lines are mostly short, can be very complicated. One loved to replace personal names with appellations, several for each name, which often make it difficult to know for certain to which god a certain phrase refers.

Important sources for Old Norse mythology are two books, which are both called *Edda*. The first one is called the Poetic Edda, the Older Edda or Saemund's Edda (English translation by L. M. Hollander, Texas University Press, 1929, 1962); the second is called the Prose Edda, the Younger Edda or Snorri's Edda (English translation by Brodeur, Oxford University Press, 1916, and partially by J. I. Young, Bowes & Bowes, 1954).

The Older Edda has one group of songs about gods and one about heroes, the latter partly being a parallel of the later German *Nibelungenlied*; there you can also find mentioned historical characters like the Gothic king Ermanarik (Old Norse form *Jormunrekr*) and Atilla the Hun (whose name was not Hunnish, though, but Gothic as well, and meaning "Little Father" - did Stalin know that?). The most important manuscript of the Poetic Edda, called *Codex Regius*, was made during the later part of the 13th century, thus far into Christian times, but it was copied from an older original that has been lost. The poems are anonymous.

The most famous poem of the Older Edda is the first one, named *Völuspá*, "the Seeress' Prophecy" (English translation by D. E. Martin Clarke, Cambridge University Press, 1923). It is put in the mouth of a dead old lady brought back to temporary life by Odhinn, and forced by him to tell him everything she knows about the beginning and end of this world. The second poem, also very famous, is called *Hávamál*, "Speech of the High One". It is ascribed to Odhinn himself, and contains a series of aphorisms about life wisdom, as well as a few biographical details about his own life. (In stanza 110 he even confesses to have broken an oath, and that confession makes him more honest than high gods use to be. Or high people, for that matter.)

The Prose Edda was written around the year 1220. Its author was a Christian man, who was named Snorri Sturluson. (Or rather, he *was named Snorri* and *was* Sturluson. Even today, most Icelandic people don't have family names. They have a first name plus the name of their father, followed by *-son* or *-dóttir* [daughter]. This

can make trouble, when a lawfully wedded Icelandic couple wants to share a hotel room in a country more endowed with moral norms than with linguistic knowledge.)

Snorri was not only author of tales, history and poems. He was also one of his time's leading Icelandic politicans. He was born in 1179 in a rich family, got much influence and made friends with kings abroad, which made his compatriots envious. He finished his life in true Nordic style, by being beaten to death by some political rivals in his own home the 23rd of September 1241. He wrote not only the Prose Edda. One important work of his is a series of sagas about Norwegian kings, called *Heimskringla* (English translation by E. Monsen and A. H. Smith, Heffer, 1931). He set a good example to later historians by at least trying to distinguish between historical facts and invented stories. How far he succeeded is a matter much discussed by later historians.

Snorri's Edda was intended as a handbook for Norse poets. It contained not only the main myths (with some efforts to make them combinable with a Christian world view, and some charming etymologies not yet accepted, for example that the *aesir* - the singular form is *áss* - were so called because they came from Asia; Snorri was versed in Greek mythology as well, and identified them with the heroes of the Iliad), but also the rules of the different metrical forms.

Information about Old Norse cult can be had from texts written by visiting or resident Christians in late pre-Christian times, mainly writing in Latin, and also by a couple of Arabic Muslims - Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah, in the 10th century. They met some Swedes in Russia, and described their practices. A third Arab, or perhaps Spaniard, in any case neither Christian nor Muslim but Jewish, was the merchant Ibrahim bin Ya'qub al-Tartushi from Córdoba, who visited the commercial town Haithabu (now Hedeby) in Denmark in the middle of the 10th century and described its inhabitants, and their habits regarding religion and food. Neither of the Arab witnesses was overly impressed.

Among Latin writers, special mention must be given to Adam of Bremen, who lived in the 11th century and wrote a history of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen (*Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, written in the 1070:s; English translation by F. J. Tschan, Columbia University Press, New York 1959), and to Saxo Grammaticus, who lived in the 12th century and wrote a history of the Danes (*Gesta danorum*; English translation by Lord Elton, Folklore Society, 1894).

The only texts actually written down by Norsemen before Christianity was introduced are rune inscriptions, and they are, for natural reasons, short, and contain little information. Older than the rune-stones (of which the overwhelming majority were made by Christians) are picture-stones, found mainly in Gotland and made from the 5th century to the 11th; but interpreting the pictures is no easy matter.

How the World Arose

According to Old Norse mythology, the universe as such was not created, but rather born. The first beings came into existence spontaneously, whereupon some of their offspring killed them and created our world from their bodies.

It is told that in the beginning, there was neither sand nor sea, neither earth nor sky. The sun didn't know where it had its halls, the stars where they had their firmament, the moon what power it had. A vast emptiness there was, called *Ginnungagap*. North of Ginnungagap was *Níflheimr*, full of ice and frost. To the south lay *Múspellheimr*. It was hot and contained a spring called *Hvergelmir*, from which flowed many waters called *Elivágar*.

Now ice from Níflheimr and fire from Múspellheimr met, and from their meeting life arose: the first cow, and the first giant.

The cow was called *Audhhumbla*. When she licked the salty, frostcovered stones, there arose the first of gods. His name was *Búri*. He became the father of *Burr*, who wedded a woman called Beisla or Bestla, sister of Mímir. They got three sons: *Odhinn*, *Vili* and *Vé*.

The giant's name was Ymir or Aurgelmir. He sucked Audhhumbla's milk. When he slept he perspired, and from the sweat in his armpit arose two giants, male and female. From them come the benevolent giants, such as Aegir or as Mímir and his sister Beisla. At the same time, Ymir's feet copulated with each other, and from that hyper-incestuous union was born his son Thrúdhgelmir, who became the father of Bergelmir - likewise without female assistance.

A conflict there was between the gods and the sons of Ymir's feet (cf. gods and titans among the Greek, or *devas* and *asuras* in India). Ymir was killed, and from his body Earth was made. His flesh is the soil, his blood the sea and lakes, his bones the mountains, his teeth the rocks and stones, his hair the forests, his skull the sky, his brain the clouds.

From the sea the sons of Burr lifted the land, thus creating *Midhgardhr*, "Middle Earth", which was to be the world of men. There the three brothers wandered, and they found two trees, possibly an ash and an elm. These they transformed into the first human beings: Askr the man, and Embla the woman. They are our primeval parents. The gods gave them breath and life, wit and all the senses. In the middle of the earth the gods then created their own dwelling of the aesir - *Asgardhr*.

Around *Midhgardhr* the gods made a wall of Ymir's eye-brows, as protection against the surviving evil giants; these live outside the wall, in *Utgardhr*, which stretches in all directions. In east is *Jotunheimr* and *Járnvidhr*, "Iron Forest", with giants looking like wolves. In north are *hrímthussar*, "frost giants", and the giant

eagle *Hraesvelgr*, "corpse-devourer", whose wings give rise to the tempest. In south is *Myrkvidhr*, "Dark Forest" (or "Mirkwood", as J. R. R. Tolkien took over the name for his story, though his map is quite different). The ruler of Myrkvidhr is Surtr.

How the World Looks

A tree there is, a mighty ash called *Yggdrasill*. In it is to be found our world, and all the worlds. It is, in short, the universe. Of its origin nothing is said, but much about its shape. Three roots it has: one among *aesir*, one among *hrímthussar*, and one among the dead.

At the root in the land of giants is the well of Mímir, where Odhinn searched wisdom. At the root in the land of gods is the well of Urdhr, where the norns are spinning our life-threads, and where the gods meet daily to discuss and to judge, riding over *Bifrost*, a bridge that only gods can pass - the rainbow (though Snorri connects it with the Milky Way). But Thórr has to come by foot, for there is no horse who can carry him.

The three norns - Urdhr, Verdandi, and Skuld - are daily feeding the tree fresh water and clay from their well, thereby keeping it alive. Other beings there are, who desire its death. On its uppermost branch sits an eagle, with a hawk on its forehead. At its foot lies a big snake or dragon called *Nidhhoggr*, and many smaller ones, more than an ignorant fool might suspect, always gnawing the roots of Yggdrasill. The snake and the eagle are not friends. A squirrel, called *Ratatoskr*, is running up and down the tree, bringing insults from one to the other and back. A goat called *Heidhrún* is eating of Yggdrasill's leaves, as are also four deer in its foliage. The side of Yggdrasill is rotting.

In Yggdrasill is *Midhgardhr*, world of men, surrounded by *Utgardhr*, the outer reaches were it is not good to go. The dwellings of the gods are there too: *Asgardhr* and *Vanaheimr*, homes of *aesir* and *vanir* respectively; but after the war between the two, hostages have been exchanged, and the *vanir* most dear to men now dwell among the *aesir*. Under *Midhgardhr* is *Hel*, dwelling of those dead who didn't deserve better.

Many trees were sacred to Old Norse people (and not only to them - cf. the Bodhi-tree of the Buddhists, or the expression *arbor una nobilis*, "only noble tree", used about the cross of Christ in the Improperia, perhaps as polemics against earlier tree cults). In many a farm in the North, and in many a temple, there was a holy tree venerated and carefully preserved from generation to generation. So Yggdrasill was the sacred tree of the worlds. It will shake and tremble when *ragnarökr* comes near, same as the sacred trees of our forefathers shook and trembled when Christian missionaries cut them dowm.

Odhinn's Sacrifice

It is told that when the world was very young, Odhinn desired wisdom. He went to the well of Mímir, where insight was to be found, and asked the benevolent giant for a drink. Mímir told him he could have one, but he must pay a price. Who will sacrifice nothing will never grow wise.

So Odhinn sacrificed himself to himself, in the same way that men should later be offered to Odhinn. Stabbed with spears he hung in the tree for nine days and nine nights, with no food and no drink, looking attentively downwards, whereupon he fell down.

He also took out one of his eyes and dropped it in Mímir's well. Since then he seems to be one-eyed, but the eye in the well looks deeper.

(Or so it is said, but perhaps a supreme war-god *must* be one-eyed, for how could you possibly wage war if you really could see both sides?)

Heimdallr's Wanderings

It is told that Heimdallr, the white *áss* born of nine mothers, wandered along the seashore. He came to a farm and introduced himself as Ríg. In the farm was a grey-haired couple, Ai (Great Grandfather) and Edda (Great Grandmother).

Heimdallr sat down between them, and Edda offered him food - a coarse bun, full of bran, and some veal. When night came, Heimdallr lay down between the two. He stayed three days, and then he went his way.

Nine months later a boy was born to Ai and Edda, with coarse skin, bony hands, thick fingers, ugly face, bent back, and long heals. He was named *Thraell*, which means "thrall"; so even slaves are of divine descent, and they are senior to others. Thraell worked hard all day, every day.

To his farm came a woman called Thy, with crooked legs, scars under her feet, sunburned arms, and curved nose. She and Thraell got well along together, laboured together, slept together, and got many children. The family made stone fences, put manure on their fields, fattened their pigs, grazed their goats, and dug out peats. From them are thralls and slaves descended.

But Heimdallr continued. From Ai and Edda he came to another farm, with a couple named Afi (Grandfather) and Amma (Grandmother). Afi was carving wood. His beard was neat, his hair well combed, his shirt did suit him well. Amma was spinning wool for cloth. Well dressed she was.

Heimdallr sat down between them, and Amma offered him food - a coarse bun and some veal. When night came, Heimdallr lay down between the two. He stayed three days, and then he went his way.

Nine months later a boy was born to Afi and Amma, with reddish skin and hair and lively eyes. He was named *Karl*, which means "freeborn man"; so freeborn, too, are of divine descent, but they are junior to thralls. Karl worked hard. He tamed oxen, made ploughs and carriages, built a house and many a barn, and tilled the soil.

To his farm came a woman called Snaer, with keys in her belt and a goat-skin skirt. She and Karl got well along together, worked together, slept together, and got many children. From them are free farmers descended.

But Heimdallr continued. From Afi and Amma he came to another farm, with a couple named Fadhir and Módhir. Fadhir was making bow and string, and shafting many an arrow. Módhir was ironing her linen and starching her sleeves. Well dressed she was. Her bosom was light, her neck whiter than snow.

Heimdallr sat down between them, and Módhir put a white, linen cloth on the table and offered him food - thin cakes of wheat, fat pork, and fried fowls. Wine was poured in the beakers. When night came, Heimdallr lay down between the two. He stayed three days, and then he went his way.

Nine months later a boy was born to Fadhir and Módhir, and swaddled in silk. His hair was blond, his cheeks were pink, his eyes were sharp as the young of snakes. He was named *Jarl*, which means "earl"; so highborn, too, are of divine descent, but they are junior to farmers as well as to thralls.

And Jarl grew up, wearing a shield, fastening bow-strings, bending bow and shafting arrows, throwing spears, training dogs and riding horses, brandishing swords and swimming in the waters.

But Heimdallr came to Jarl and taught him runes. He asked him to take the country settled since times before memory. So Jarl rode through black forests and over frosty mountains, fought and won. Alone he ruled over eighteen farms.

A wife he got, named Erna. She and Jarl got well along together, exercised power together, slept together, and got many children. From them is the gentry descended.

Dwarves' Treasures

Many treasures the gods possessed, and these were mostly made and delivered by dwarves.

It is told that one day Loki, out of pure spite, cut the golden hair from the head of the goddess Sif. Now, to cut the hair of a goddess without her consent is always a risky enterprise; and not less so, if said goddess happens to be married to the strongest of all the gods, and Sifs husband was Thórr.

Thórr was not only strong but also short of temper. Loki would have passed away with no further delay, had not his tongue been faster than Thórr's weapon

(whatever it was at this time, for this occurred before he got his famous hammer). With a sweet voice - and like many unreliable people, he could talk very sweetly when that was profitable - Loki promised to compensate Sifs loss, and to do so several times over.

Loki knew two dwarves, who boasted to be the best of smiths; and two other dwarves, who did the same. The first two, he persuaded to make three treasures: new hair for Sif, made of pure gold, but growing as living hair should; a ship for Freyr, called *Skídhbladhnir*, so cunningly made that it could be folded and put in a pouch when not in use, though full-sized when it was, a ship that could travel over land and sea and which would always have a fair wind, in whatever direction it went; and finally for Odhinn a spear called *Gungnir*, of which he would make good use.

When this was done, Loki went to the other two dwarves, told them what the first two dwarves had produced and wagered his head that they would never be able to do anything similar. These dwarves did not like to be belittled (little folks seldom do, which was exactly what Loki had counted on), and they accepted the bet.

First they made for Freyr a boar called *Slídhrugtanni* or *Gullinbursti*. As the latter name implied, his bristles were of gold (same as Sif's new hair, though not even Thórr would have dared to compare her to a boar) and could lighten the darkest of nights. He could run faster than any horse.

For Odhinn they made a golden ring, called *Draupnir*. Each ninth night, from this ring would drop eight other rings of the same size and weight as itself. (Perhaps this was the beginning of inflation, but this is not mentioned in the myths.)

Finally they began to make a present for Thórr, a hammer called *Mjollnir*, "Crusher", which when thrown would always hit its goal and then return to its user.

But during all this work, the two dwarves were constantly pestered by an angry gad-fly - Loki could transform himself even into an insect. The fly stung the dwarf who was working the bellows, but he didn't let himself be disturbed until, when making the hammer, he was stung by the fly right on the eyelid. Then he lifted one hand and chased it away. Therefore, Thórr's hammer has a short handle.

(From this we may learn that evil forces are not necessarily knowledgeable about aerodynamics. For a hammer that was meant to be thrown, a long handle would have been no advantage.)

In any case, Loki had evidently lost his bet. This he hadn't intended to do, so he ran away; but Thórr captured him and sent him back to the dwarves, who had a claim on his head. They meant to chop it off; but Loki's tongue served him once again. He explained that he had wagered his head, for sure, but not his neck; so if the kindly dwarves wanted to decapitate him, they had to do so without hurting his

neck, and that is difficult to do.

The dwarves were rather sore with him for this, but they had to admit they hadn't studied the details of their agreement attentively enough. Loki's neck actually wasn't part of his head - but his lips were, and these they stitched up with a very strong thread, which they thought would keep him silent.

And so it did, but only for a while, because nothing could shut up Loki's mouth for good. It is not known whether Loki after this is regarded by all lawyers as their patron.

When *ragnarökr* comes, Loki will lead the evil forces; but Mjollnir and Gungnir will then be used by the gods, so he has made himself bad service.

Gods at War

An evil giant woman there was, named *Gullveig* or *Angrbodha*. As shown by her first name, which literally means "Gold-drink" or "Gold-drunkenness", she was the embodiment of thirst for gold. She came to Asgardhr and was received with friendliness. There she spread discord, particularly among the women, telling the *aesir* that the *vanir* were not content with their own power, but wanted to usurp that of the *aesir* as well. The latter didn't believe her at first, sentenced her to death, and burnt her, thus breaking the peace that every host is obliged to grant his guests; but she was reborn by other parents, with another name, came back to Asgardhr and did the same once again. A second time she was burnt. A third time she was reborn, came back, made evil and was burnt to death; but still she is alive.

At last, having three times died, Gullveig achieved her goal. Strife was sown between *aesir* and *vanir*. This was the first of wars in our world, but it certainly wouldn't be the last. It was declared by Odhinn, when he threw his spear over the army of the *vanir*, but the war went bad for the *aesir* to begin with. The *vanir* couldn't bring the war to a fast victory, however - already at the beginning of time, a war was easier to start than to finish. It went on and on until both parties had tired of it (as warring parties may still do after sufficiently long time).

Since they were, after all, gods, they managed to make peace again, and to avoid repeating the war between them, they decided to exchange hostages. Three *vanir* moved to Asgardhr - Njordhr, Freyr, and Freyja. From Asgardhr to Vanaheimr went Odhinn's brother Hoenir. Both families of gods also exchanged their wisest men, so Mímir went from the *aesir* to the *vanir*, in exchange for a man called Kvásir; but in what way the latter belonged to the *vanir* is not quite clear, for he is said to have been created of the spittle of *aesir* and *vanir* together when they made peace.

When Hoenir arrived in Vanaheimr, he was immediately made chief, with Mímir as his counsellor. All went well, as long as Hoenir and Mímir were together;

but when they weren't, Hoenir always gave one and the same answer: "May others decide"; for he was not fond of power, nor of much talk. Therefore, the *vanir* suspected they had received a less wise man than they had given, so they cut off Mímir's head and sent it back to the *aesir*. But Odhinn took the head, smeared it with herbs to prevent it from rotting, sang incantations over it and prepared it in such a way that it could hear him, talk to him, and tell him many things.

About Kvásir, who had been sent from Vanaheimr to Asgardhr, it is said that it was impossible to ask him a question he couldn't answer. He travelled widely and taught wisdom to human beings. But two dwarves, named Fjalar and Galar, killed him. They let his blood flow into two vats, called *Són* and *Bodhn*, and a kettle, called *Odhrörir*. There they mixed the blood with honey, and thus made the mead of which all poets and scholars drink (this was written at a time when scholars were still expected to have some understanding of poetry), and that is the reason why poetry was by the Norsemen called "Kvásir's Blood" or "Dwarves' Drink". But to the *aesir*, the two dwarves said that Kvásir had drowned in his own learning, because there was no one well-informed enough to compete with him in knowledge.

Loki's Offspring

Now each time Gullveig had been burnt, Loki searched in the ashes until he found her blackened heart, and each time, he ate it. Each time, the evil woman's heart made him pregnant; and each time, he gave birth to a monster.

First of the three was a wolf called *Fenrir*. He grew up among the *aesir*, who treated him like they would have done with any charming puppy; but soon he was a pup no more. Big he became, and still bigger; and his strenght grew with his body.

At last, the war-god Tyr was the only one who had the courage to feed Fenrir, and the gods dared not let the wolf run loose any more; but by then, it was to late to subdue him with force alone. Cunning was needed.

As a game, they flattered Fenrir that he certainly could rip asunder these fetters or those, and he let them put the fetters on him to let him prove it; which, unfortunately, he could. Every time.

At last, the gods let dwarves make a fetter called *Gleipnir*. This fetter was made of cats' noice, women's beards, mountains' roots, bears' sinews, fishes' breath and birds' saliva; and the dwarves had to use up all of it, so that is the reason why cats are so silent nowadays. (Of course, bears *do* have sinews; but I have some understanding if whoever made up this myth was hesitant to go close enough to be able to check this up.)

Gleipnir was soft as silk, but in spite of that, Fenrir was suspicious. The gods told him that if he had been able to tear the other fetters, which were much thicker,

this one certainly would be no problem; but Fenrir didn't quite believe them. Before he let them put it on him he demanded, as a proof there was no treachery, that one of the gods would put his best hand in his mouth.

To say that the gods didn't really like to do this would be no exaggeration, since there *was* treachery behind it all. However, Tyr was brave and generous, and to save the world of gods and men from great peril, he put his right hand in the wolf's mouth. Thereupon the fetter was laid upon Fenrir, and when he found he couldn't break it, he promptly bit Tyr's hand off and swallowed it.

Since that time, Tyr is known as *inn einhendi áss* - "the one-handed god", same as the other war-god, Odhinn, is said to have only one eye left, having sacrificed the other one in the well of Mímir.

This was bad for Tyr, who at *ragnarökr* will have to fight with his left hand only, and then he and the hell-hound Garmr will kill each other (unfortunately for his chances of survival, he is not left-handed); but no good for Fenrir. There is not much meat in a hand, and Fenrir will remain fettered until *ragnarökr*. Then he will kill Odhinn, only to be killed himself by Odhinn's son Vídharr.

The next offspring of Loki, when fertilized by Gullveig's scorched heart, was a snake. He too grew until he was too difficult to handle. Then he was thrown by Odhinn into the sea. There he continued to grow, until he stretched around all continents. So he still does, biting his own tail when not sticking up his head; and he is not a good being to be surrounded by. He is called the Midhgardhr Serpent (*Midhgardhsormr*). Thórr has tried several times to kill him, of no avail. Only at *ragnarökr* will he succeed, but even then only after the snake has spat so much venom on him that he himself will sink down and die.

Loki's third offspring by the wicked woman's heart is a female creature called Hel. She is blue and white, ugly to behold, and not good of heart. Soon she was exiled to a land under the earth. There she is queen, and her subjects are those who have died without honour.

Asgardhr's Wall and Odhinn's Horse

It is told that when the gods had made Asgard, they began to worry how to defend it against all giants that were still loose. Then came a master-builder, a giant in disguise, who offered to make for them a wall that would give them good protection. As pay he would get, if the wall was ready in the course of one winter and with no other aid than his only horse, Freyja for wife as well as the sun and the moon. The gods hesitated, but Loki persuaded them to agree, telling them that the man would never be finished in time.

But the builder's only horse was a stallion, named *Svadhilfari*. Big it was and strong. Each night it brought the stone slabs needed, and the gods were scared

when they saw how close the builder was to succeeding - three days before summer, only the gate remained to be done. So they told Loki that since he had put them into this situation, he had better solve it too, or else...

And Loki was cunning and skilled in many things. He transformed himself into a mare in heat, so Svadhilfari suddenly lost interest in work. Thereby the wall was not ready in time, and the gods did not have to pay. When the builder said, one might suppose with a certain emphasis, what he thought about this, the gods called on Thórr, who payd the giant by crushing his head with his hammer.

To break a contract, though, is no better to gods than to men - the Roman saying *quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi*, that the high god could permit himself to do things that were not permissible to lesser folks, seems not to have been accepted by the Old Norse people. If the gods had, for the time being, prevented evil from entering Asgardhr, on the other hand they gave it a place in their own hearts, and this was to be an important step in their progressing corruption. Already at the dawn of this age, the foundation was laid for its downfall in *ragnarökr*.

Some months later, Loki gave birth to a horse with eight legs. It was named *Sleipnir* and given to Odhinn. It is faster than any other steed, and it can run on empty air as well as on solid ground.

Idhunn's Apples Stolen, Wedding of Njordhr and Skadhi

It is told that the two gods Odhinn and Hoenir and Odhinn's sworn brother, Loki the giant, once were wandering together. When time came to eat, they tried to fry an entire ox over open fire, but they didn't succeed. Then appeared a big eagle in an oak, and cried down to them that he would fry the ox for them, if they gave him part of it. They agreed about that, but forgot to discuss how big a part he would get; and the eagle, who in fact was the giant Thjazi in disguise, intended to get the greater part of the ox.

Loki, however, did not approve of these plans, so he took a stick and tried to beat the eagle's back. That was not wisely done, for through Thjazi's magic, the stick stuck to his back, and Loki to the stick. When the eagle took to flight, Loki was therefore forced to fly as well, but not by his own will or his own wings (which he could elseway easily have done, for Loki too was skilled in such disguises).

The flight was such that even Loki was scared, and at last Thjazi told him he could get loose again only on one condition: Loki must give to Thjazi the godess Idhunn. That would not be kind to her or to Bragi, who was her husband; but it would mean disaster to all other gods as well, for it was Idhunn's apples who daily restored their youth. Without them, they would not any more be immune to aging, and what could be more pathetic than a senile immortal?

Loki was not hard to ask. He liked to have his freedom back, and his friendship towards the gods was in any case not very deep. Besides he was, as many wicked people, very nice; so it was not difficult for him to lure Idhunn away from Asgardhr

and to Thjazi's dwelling.

Now when Loki kept their apple a day away, the gods' hair grew grey, and their skin became wrinkled. At last they got to know who was behind it all. Their mood was bad, and they threatened to kill Loki if he did not bring Idhunn back, and her apples too.

Loki's friendship towards the gods was not profound, but his love for his own life was, so he borrowed Freyja's falcon disguise and took to the air, and better he found it to be to fly with wings of his own, even if borrowed. When he came to Thjazi's house, its owner was out fishing, but Idhunn was at home. Then Loki transformed her into a nut, took it in his claws and flew towards Asgardhr. Thjazi soon found out what had happened, got his own eagle disguise and took up the pursuit. He was faster than Loki, so if the latter had started later, or Thjazi earlier, the future of the gods, and thereby of the world, would have been very different indeed; but the *aesir* had collected a large heap of shavings behind their wall, and as soon as Loki had passed it, they put it on fire. Thus Thjazi's wings were burned, and he fell down in Asgardhr, where Thórr used his hammer, and Thjazi was no more. Thórr took his eyes and threw them into the sky, and there we can still see them as two brightly shining stars.

But Thjazi had a daughter called Skadhi. She came to Asgardhr to revenge her father, as was her sacred duty; and the gods offered her, instead of killing one of them, which was the normal form of revenge, to marry whichever of them she wanted. They thought that marriage must under any circumstances be better than death. (This happened so long ago that even the gods were young.)

When Skadhi was to make her choice, she was permitted to see only the feet of the gods. She thought that the most beautiful feet must surely belong to Baldr, who was best of *aesir* and whom she would gladly have for husband. But those feet sat on the legs of Njordhr, and they were united in wedlock.

Their marriage was not a happy one. Skadhi loved the mountains, where she found pleasure in skiing and hunting, but Njordhr was god of the sea, loved to fish and to hear the gulls. When Njordhr, to please his wife, lived for nine days in the mountains, he got sick of the sound of wolves and sight of hill-sides and longed for the waters; but when Skadhi accompanied him back to his home, she couldn't stand being wakened each morning by the cries of sea-birds.

Thórr's Trip to Utgardhar-Loki

Evil was Loki, but cunning, and at times his cunningness was of use to the gods.

It is told that once Thórr and Loki were travelling together, having some errand to the land of giants; and when evening came, they stopped at a farm. There they supped, and the main course was Thórr's two he-goats, whom he butchered to be

cooked and eaten. After the meal, the goats' skins were spread out, and the bones collected in them. Then Thórr took his hammer and blessed the goats with it, and they arose, fully alive and sound. Or sound they should have been, as they used to be at such occasions, and one of them was; but the other one limped.

When Thórr found this, he began to look angry, and Thórr's wrath can scare the wits out of anyone; so when he asked their hosts how this could be, the son in the family, Thjálfi by name, confessed that he had split one bone to get the marrow (as Loki had told him he could do, so the latter wasn't quite reliable even at this occasion). The farmer understood what revenge this could cause, so he offered Thórr to take with him both Thjálfi and his sister Roskva as thralls.

Next morning the gang of four, which they had now become, continued the travel. All day they went through a vast forest, and when evening came, they arrived at a big building with an opening at one side. They groped their way into it and lay down to sleep; but before daybreak the earth began to quake and tremble violently, and the building danced. They were scared and went away from the opening, further into the hall. At the right-hand side, they found an opening to a corridor. There they sat, while Thórr kept an eye at the entrance with a hand on his hammer. All night long, they heard the rumble and felt the shakings.

When day had come they dared to go out, and they saw an incredibly big giant sleeping not far away. The rumble they had heard all night was his snoring. Thórr wasn't overly fond of giants, so he fastened his strenght-giving girdle around his waist and gripped his hammer; but the giant was so enormous that even Thórr hesitated to give him the fatal blow, when he saw him waking up. The giant introduced himself as Skrymir, which quite simply means "Big One"; and that he certainly was. Then he bent down to pick up his mitten, which turned out to be the house where Thórr and his companions had spent the night. The corridor they had entered when the earth started to quake was its thumb.

Now Skrymir proposed that they travel together, and that they put all their belongings in his sack. So they did, and off they went. Longlegged as he was, Skrymir was soon far ahead of the others. At sundown, those found him sitting and waiting under an oak-tree. While supper was being prepared, he took a nap.

To prepare their supper, however, Thórr needed something in the bag; but he couldn't open it. Skrymir had made a too efficient knot. Thórr tried and tried, and at last, completely frustrated, he took his hammer and gave Skrymir a a mighty blow to kill him. The giant then opened one eye and softly asked if possibly a leaf had fallen on him from the tree...

So the four had to go to bed without supper, but they had great difficulty to sleep because of Skrymir's snoring, which once again made the earth quake. Once again Thórr hit him with his hammer, harder than before; and this time, Skrymir opened both eyes and wanted to know whether an acorn had fallen on him.

Thórr had to go to bed again, but he was deeply hurt in his professional pride - a thunder-god should be able to do better than this. In the morning, therefore, when the giant had fallen asleep again, he hit him a third time, with all his power and some more. So hard was the blow that the hammer sank into the giant's head right up to the handle; so this time Skrymir actually sat up, and wondered if some bird had been impudent enough to shit on him.

Before their ways parted, Skrymir gave some good advice to Thórr about how he should behave when he reached his goal: the estate of a giant called Utgardhar-Loki. The men there were, he said, even bigger than he. Than he took farewell and departed, and the four didn't see him again, to their relief.

At noon the four reached Utgardhar-Loki's estate, and they found that it wasn't indeed smaller than Skrymir had told them. The house was so big, they didn't even have to open the gate - they had no problem squeezing themselves in between the logs of which it was made.

In the hall sat Utgardhar-Loki himself. It took some time for the host to see such small visitors, and when he finally did, he received them without exaggerated courteousness. He told them what he thought about the possible capacity of such midgets, and when Thórr tried to make him understand that he wasn't a weakling, Utgardhar-Loki proposed that he and his companions compete with the estate's own folks, if they really wanted to show off; but he warned them that they wouldn't have much chance.

First Loki - the usual Loki, this time on Thórr's side - would compete with a man of almost the same name as he: Logi. They would see who could eat most and fastest; for this, Loki said, was something for which he had a special knack, and the only sport he really cared about. A trough was put between them, full of meat. They started eating, and met right at the middle. Loki had then eaten all the meat all right; but Logi had devoured not only the meat, but also the bones, and even the wood of the trough itself.

Second, Thjálfi and a boy of the estate, called Hugi, would see who could run fastest; but when Thjálfi had run half the distance, he met Hugi, who had run it all and was on his way back.

Third, Thórr would show his ability. Drinking, he said, was something he was very fond of; so a horn was brought, filled to the brim with mead. Thórr thought he could easily empty it at one draught; but when he had tried three times he looked, and one could hardly see any difference in the amount of mead left in the horn.

Well, said Thórr, other things he was good at were lifting heavy things and wrestling. Utgardhar-Loki asked him if he thought he would be able to lift his cat, and Thórr said that would be no problem. The cat came in, and Thórr tried to lift it, and he heaved and heaved, but the cat just bent his back, and the only thing Thórr could do was, after long struggle, to force it to lift one of its four paws from the

floor.

Remained the wrestling. Utgardhar-Loki said that it would be to risky to let such a weak person as Thórr wrestle one of his men, but well - he could try Utgardhar-Loki's foster-mother, an old hag named Elli. Thórr thought this to be under his dignity, of course; but remembering his feats up to then, he kept silent.

In came the woman, looking all decrepit; but try as he would, Thórr could not force her down. At last, after long time, the lady forced *him* down on one knee.

Ashamed was Thórr, and deeply; but the giants didn't scorn him, as he would have expected them to do. He and his companions were served an excellent meal, and stayed overnight.

Next morning, when the four were to depart, Utgardhar-Loki followed them to the gate; and when they had finally left the ground of the estate, he told them something. Actually, magic had been used, and not everything had been what it seemed to be.

Skrymir, whom they had met on their way, was Utgardhar-Loki himself in disguise. When Thórr had thrice hit him with Mjollnir, the hammer hadn't hit his head but the hard rock beside it, and on their way back, they would be able to see three deep clefts, which Thórr had unwittingly created.

The word *logi* means "flame", and that was what Logi was - not a man, but fire. No wonder he had consumed both meat, bones and wood.

In the same way, *hugi* means "thought", and the runner Hugi was Utgardhar-Loki's; so how would Thjálfi have been able to run faster?

The mead Thórr had drunk was the water of the sea, in which the hollow tip of the horn had been tremped. When Thórr had drunk, all the world had ebb.

The cat was Thórr's old enemy, the Midhgardhr Serpent, lying in the sea around all continents; and to force it to lift one paw (especially since snakes don't have any) was no small thing.

The old lady Elli, finally, was old age itself, who will subdue the strongest of men if they live long enough; so when Thórr had only been forced down on one knee, and not on his back, Utgardhar-Loki's men had been mightily scared.

It had been a pleasure to meet, said Utgardhar-Loki, but there are pleasures which should preferably not be repeated. Thórr agreed about that, and wanted to prevent future meetings with the help of his hammer; but when he got it out of his belt, neither Utgardhar-Loki nor his estate was there any more.

Thórr's fishing-tour

Perhaps Thórr wanted to have revenge for these happenings, and if he couldn't meet Utgardhar-Loki again, maybe he could meet the Midhgardhr Serpent and find a final solution to that problem.

In any case, it is told that once, as many other times, the gods were feasting in the halls of Aegir, eating game and drinking mead to their heart's delight. A good feast it was, but Thórr was in a bad mood and complained anyway. Aegir became sore over this and began to think of some way to have his revenge. Finally he told Thórr that if he thought there was too little to drink, he could bring a bigger pot next time.

Now Aegir in fact had no lack of pots, and big ones at that, so Thórr was really in a pinch how to find a bigger one; which he quite simply had to, or Aegir would have scored a point over him. He asked the other gods discretely if they had any idea, but no one could help him; until Tyr whispered to him, when nobody else was listening, that his foster-father had a big pot indeed - one league deep.

Well, that sounded simple; but Tyr's foster-father happened to be the sea giant Hymir, living east of the Elivágar, in Jotunheimr. Thórr had been to Jotunheimr quite often, but seldom in peaceful errands.

Thórr and Tyr made the trip together, and arrived safely to Hymir's estate. They were well received by Tyr's grandmother, who was not a beauty queen - she had nine hundred heads - and by his mother, who was. The latter offered the two *aesir* something to drink, and hid them under the pots. She thought it would be safer for them that way, because her husband was not always polite to his guests. His character was as ugly as his body.

After a long time, Hymir came home. His beard was full of frost. His wife told him that they had received a surprise visit of her son, but also of Thórr who, unfortunately, was no friend of giants; so the guests were a little shy, and they had hidden themselves behind one of the posts that carried the ceiling.

That was, of course, not at all the place where the guests really were hiding, but she had good cause to lie a little; for when Hymir sent an angry look at the post she had indicated, it was crushed by the force from his Superman eyes. When this was done, Thórr and Tyr could safely show themselves and tell their errand. It would take Hymir some time to reload.

Hymir wasn't glad to se Thórr, but hospitality was a sacred duty even to giants (at least if they didn't succeed in killing the guests at first sight), so he had to offer him and Tyr something. Three bulls were brought, their heads chopped off, and their meat cooked. During the trip to Utgardhar-Loki, Loki had bragged about his eating capacity; but Thórr wasn't bad at it either. Of the three bulls, he alone devoured two.

Hymir wasn't excessively generous. He complained loudly over Thórr's eating habits, and said they would have to contend themselves with game at next meal. Thórr, however, said that some fish wouldn't be bad for a change; and he was willing to catch it himself, if his host vould be kind enough to give him some bait. Hymir asked him to go to his herd of oxen and take the bait himself, if he dared.

Thórr did. He went right to a pitch black ox, broke his horns and killed him.

And off he and Hymir went in a rowing-boat. When they had come as far from land that Hymir wished, Thórr insisted at rowing a little more. Then they started fishing. Hymir got two whales at the hook at the same time; but Thórr, sitting in the stern, had other plans. He baited his hook with the head of the ox, and threw it in the sea.

A catch he got - the Midhgardhr Serpent. Thórr had to use all his strenght to lift it, and his feet went through the bottom of the boat. With Mjollnir he gave the serpent's head a mightly blow, but one blow wasn't enough to kill him, and now Hymir was scared and cut Thórr's fishing-line. The serpent sank back into the sea, and there he will stay till *ragnarökr*, when he and Thórr will finally manage to put each other to death.

Hymir wasn't glad at all, when he and Thórr rowed back. He told Thórr that they would now have to divide their tasks. Thórr could either carry the whales to Hymir's house, or moor the boat. But Thórr didn't like to be told what to do, so of the two alternatives, he elected a third: he carried the boat right back to the house.

That was meant to prove his strength, of course; but Hymir wasn't impressed. He gave Thórr a cup and said that who couldn't crush it, shouldn't brag about how strong he was. But if Thórr could indeed destroy the cup, he would have the big pot for which he had come.

Thórr didn't pass the test at the first attempt. He threw the cup at one of the posts in the hall, and the post went to pieces; but the cup did not.

Then Tyr's mother whispered something in Thórr's ear, and he hit the cup against Hymir's head - and that proved to be the only thing around that was hard enough to destroy the cup.

Hymir didn't even get a headache, but he was sad to have lost the cup. However, a promise was a promise, and he kindly asked Thórr and Tyr to depart as fast as possible and take the bloody pot with them - <u>if</u> they could carry it. Tyr tried twice, but couldn't. Thórr tried once, and could.

Off they went, but it seems that Hymir, having kept his promise, saw no reason to be extreme about it; for when Thórr looked around, he saw Hymir and a host of other giants coming at them from behind.

But such a simple problem was easily solved, thanks to Mjollnir.

Shortly afterward, however, one of Thórr's he-goats fell. He hadn't recovered yet from the treatment Thjálfi had given him when cleaving his bone.

Thórr and Tyr returned to Aegir with Hymir's pot; and since then, Aegir has had no excuse not to make much enough mead.

Parts of this story may be of very high age, for in Indian mythology, it is said that the thunder-god Indra killed a mighty dragon in single combat.

Hrungnir and Mokkrkálfi

It is told that when Odhinn had received his eight-legged horse Sleipnir from Loki, he at once wanted to test him; for a horse with eight legs was something new. So he saddled Sleipnir, sat up and rode away through the air.

Sleipnir turned out to be a good steed indeed. To ride him was a pure delight, and Odhinn enjoyed it so much that he didn't notice where he was going, and suddenly Sleipnir had brought him to Jotunheimr, the land of the giants. (Perhaps Sleipnir had a genetical longing to go there - his father, or rather mother, was after all Loki, who came from Jotunheimr, although he had been living in Asgardhr since times immemorial.)

In Jotunheimr they met the giant Hrungnir, who also was the proud owner of an excellent horse, called Gullfaxi or Goldmane. Giants as a rule were not very humble, and when he saw Odhinn on Sleipnir coming with utmost speed like a primordial cruising missile, Hrungnir at once challenged him to see whose horse was best.

Odhinn accepted and halted while Hrungnir sat up on Gullfaxi. Then at the same time they started. Sleipnir was somewhat faster, but not very much - or perhaps Odhinn held him back a little for purposes of his own - and same as Odhinn, now Hrungnir did not look out where they were going; but this time Odhinn did.

And suddenly they both passed the wall around Asgardhr, and entered the domain of the gods. This hadn't been Hrungnir's intention, but done was done, and he couldn't back out again without losing face, which giants definitively didn't like to do.

Now the *aesir* invited Hrungnir to have a drink, and he accepted, seeing that Thórr wasn't present - he was reputed in Jotunheimr to be his equal, but he wasn't overly eager to test it. He was even asked to drink his mead out of Thórr's own cup; but while doing this, he turned out to have a limited capacity of holding his liquor, and he began to brag about how he would, sooner or later, and probably sooner, break down al Asgardhr, throw it into the sea and run away with both Freyja and Sif.

Well, even among Old Norse gods it was not regarded as good manners to promise to run away with someone's wife while drinking from his cup; and in that moment, Sif's husband Thórr himself entered, and it became obvious that the invitation had been done without his consent.

So Thórr said with a certain emphasis what he thought about giants in general and Hrungnir in particular. Hrungnir returned the courtesies, and added some. Only one outcome was possible: a duel between Hrungnir and Thórr. They would go *til einvígis*, at a place called Grjóttúnagardhar "on the frontier"; and this, says Snorri,

was the first time that Thórr would partake in a regular duel.

Well, not a duel exactly, since they agreed upon a double combat rather than a single one; Thórr and Hrungnir would have one companion each.

The *aesir* probably expected Thórr to elect as his companion one of the most war-hardened gods, such as Tyr or even his father Odhinn. But it seems that Thórr had got a good impression of the young boy Thjálfi, or Thjelvar as he was called in a more eastern dialect. It is true he had for a while spoiled one of Thórr's he-goats, but that had been done at Loki's instigation, which was difficult to resist for more experienced men than he; and it is true that Thjálfi had not had good luck in the competitions at Utgardhar-Loki's estate, but so what? Neither had Thórr.

One may suppose that Hrungnir, too, expected Thórr to elect a most formidable companion; and since he didn't quite trust his own ability to vanquish Thórr, he understood that he needed someone special to help him.

He decided to practice psychological warfare. If the aesir weren't impressed by ordinary giants, big as they were, at least they had to be so by an even bigger one. So he and his friends made the Biggest Giant in the World. They made him of clay, and they gave him life by inserting the heart of a mare in his body.

This predecessor of the Golem and of Frankenstein's monster was called Mokkrkálfi. He was nine leagues tall and three leagues broad under his arms. (That meant, of course, that when he was standing, his nose was somewhere in the stratosphere, so he must have had some breathing difficulties.)

Hrungnir's own heart was made of stone, with three corners. Of stone were also his head and his shield. His weapon was a whetstone (hein).

The time for the combat had come. Of course, neither Thórr nor Thjálfi was impressed by Mokkrkálfi. They were too clever to be taken in by size alone. Indeed, the mere sight of Thórr was enough the scare the wit out of the giant of giants, if he had had any to begin with, and to make him pee in his possible pants.

Thjálfi - small but brave, and cunning - came first, pretended to be a traitor, and told Hrungnir that he had better put his shield under his feet, to make it more difficult for Thórr to attack him from below, as was his wont in such cases; and when the giant followed his advice, Thórr of course appeared from the sky. Thjálfi in the meantime put an arrow into Mokkrkálfi's mare's heart; and that was the end of the super-giant project.

Thórr and Hrungnir wasted no time to throw their weapons at each other. The god's hammer and the giant's whetstone met in mid-air. The whetstone was cleaved, and one part of it penetrated Thórr's head, but without causing his death. Mjollnir, on the other hand, crushed Hrungnir's head; and that was his bane.

Thórr's hammer returned to the hand of its wounded owner, but Hrungnir's body at the same time fell over him, and no one present managed to lift him off. At last came Thórr's son Magni, who had been born only three nights earlier, and who had

inherited the strenght of his father, and did it. As a reward he was given Hrungnir's horse, and it is said that after *ragnarökr*, he will also get Thórr's hammer as inheritance. Odhinn, however, blamed Thórr for giving the horse to his son and not to his father.

How to get rid of the stone in Thórr's head was a problem, too. Surgery was under-developed at this time, so only magic would do. They got in touch with a seeress, who began her incantations; but Thórr wanted to encourage her, and began to tell her a little of his past adventures. That was a mistake, for the seeress became so fascinated that she stopped singing. Therefore, one part of the stone is still left in Thórr's head. This may impede his capacity, so it is no wonder that evil forces are still around.

Thjálfi Saves an Island

Thjálfi had now proved his value to Thórr. There is a third story about him, but not in Icelandic sources.

In the middle of the Baltic Sea, there is an island, which was in the Viking Age called *Gutland*, "Land of the Guta People", nominally subject to the Swedish king (according to the Swedes) but in practice (and according to its own inhabitants also officially) an independent republic and equal contract partner with Sweden. It was an important centre of commerce - half of the Viking Age Arab, German, and Anglo-Saxon silver coins in what is now Swedish territory have been found there.

When the Danes conquered the island in 1361, its name was changed to *Gulland*, "Golden Land"; and when the Swedes took it (back) three centuries later (in 1645, seven years after the establishment of the New Sweden colony around the Delaware River, and ten years before the Dutch threw the Swedes out of it), it became *Gotland*, "Land of the Goths" (or, with a 19th century spelling, *Gottland,* as still used for the place New Gottland near McPherson in Nevada).

This island is the most important place in the world, because I grew up there.

In primeval times, it was under the curse of sinking each morning in the sea, and rising again each evening ("thá war Gutland só elvist, at thet daghum sanc oc nátum war uppi," to cite the Guta Saga). But Thjálfi, or Thjelvar as he is called there, brought fire to Gutland, and since then it has never sunk again. (Not even under the weight of American tourists and all their luggage.)

Thjálfi had a son called Hafthi. He and his wife Huítastierna were the first people to live in Gutland. It is told that one night, she had a dream about three snakes curling together in her breast, and crawling out of it. She told this to her husband, and he took it to mean that they should get three sons, who would divide Gutland between them and make it permanently inhabited.

Thus it occured. Their oldest son, the owner of the northern part was called

Graipr, the one of the middle part Guti, and the one of the southern part - their youngest son - Gunfiaun. This pre-Christian division of the island into three parts still remains - in the local administration of the Christian state church.

So now you know my inheritance - I spent my childhood among descendants of Thórr's servant.

Thórr's Hammer Stolen

It is told that one morning Thórr woke up, and got the worst shock of his life: he couldn't find his hammer. Mjollnir wasn't to be seen anywhere. Thórr shook his head and groped everywhere, but in vain.

Now Thórr was a very strong god, but not overly bright, so he had to discuss this problem with somebody; and the one who happened to be at hand was Loki - who *was* bright, as unreliable people quite often are.

Loki at once had an idea what to do to begin with, and together he and Thórr paid a visit to Freyja and asked her if they might borrow her falcon-disguise. Freyja was not unwilling. (She seldom was.)

This disguise had the useful quality of not only making its wearer look like a falcon, but also giving him or her such a bird's flying ability and sharp eyes. Now Loki dressed in the disguise and made a fast trip to Jotunheimr, straight to a giant called Thrymr, whom he suspected to have stolen the hammer.

As usually, he turned out to be well informed. Being directly asked by Loki, Thrymr confessed to have taken the hammer and hidden it eight leagues under the earth. His reason to take it was blackmail: he was quite willing to return it, on the condition that he would get Freyja's hand in marriage.

As soon as Loki had got this information, he flew back to Asgardhr. When he approached, Thórr expected him very impatiently, and forced him to answer even before landing.

So he did, and Thórr found the condition acceptable; but Freyja, when they told her to prepare for the wedding, did not. She made a ruckus which no latter-day feminist has been able to equal. The phrase "male chauvinist pigs" had not yet been coined at this time, but that may be supposed to have been more or less what she meant.

The situation was desperate, for the loss of Mjollnir would decisively change the power of balance between giants and gods; so all the aesir, male and female, met in council to discuss the matter.

Who came up with the solution was Heimdallr, the white áss. It was quite simple: since it was absolutely necessary to get Mjollnir back, since Thrymr demanded to have Freyja as wife to return it, and since this was beyond the limits even of her willingness, one could dress Thórr up to look as her.

Thórr didn't like it at all, but he was voted down. So he was dressed up and sent away to Thrymr's estate, and - since he really wasn't extremely smart - Loki was sent with him, playing the role of his bridesmaid. (Loki didn't mind. When getting his offspring, he had already showed some transsexual tendencies anyway.)

Now the two took place in Thórr's carriage, and were drawn by his he-goats to Jotunheimr. They were lavishly received by Thrymr, who was more than contented.

The feast began, and food and drink was served. Thórr alone at one ox, eight salmons and most of the other courses. He drank three full barrels of mead.

Thrymr hadn't quite expected that his blushing bride would have such an appetite, so he began to look a little worried; but Loki told him there was no need to be astonished. Freyja, he said, hadn't been able to eat or drink for eight days, out of longing for her future husband.

Appeased by these words, Thrymr desired to have a first kiss from his bride. He bent down and lifted her veil, but when he saw the expression in Freyja's eyes, he was scared stiff and fled to the other end of the hall. But Loki tranquillized him once again, saying that the poor maiden hadn't been been able to sleep for eight nights, out of longing for the wonderful night ahead, so she might be a little red-eyed.

Finally came the moment when Thrymr and Freyja would be declared husband and wife. To do this, Mjollnir was finally brought in and laid in the bride's lap.

And the rest is history, albeit mythological such. When Thrymr finally understood who "Freyja" actually was, he wasn't gay at all; but he didn't have to suffer long, for Thórr killed him straight away, and finished off all his family as well. He didn't like to leave things half-done.

Freyr and Gerdhr

In Asgardhr there was a tower called Hlidhskjálf. It was owned by Odhinn, and it was so high that he could sit there and look out over all the worlds.

Sometimes it was used by the other gods as well. Freyr once did so, and that was to have fateful consequences.

It is told that when Freyr was sitting in Hlidhskjálf, he looked towards Jotunheimr; and there he saw a fair giant maiden walking between two houses of her fathers estate. Her name was Gerdhr, daughter of Gymir, and Freyr fell in love with her at once - and when a love-god falls in love, that is something.

Freyr showed all the usual symptoms of unhappy love, and his father Njordhr was worried about him. Therefore, he asked Freyr's servant, called Skírnir, to talk to Freyr and find out what was the matter.

Skírnir did not like to ask Freyr, because he was certain that the god would be angry with him; but a permanently depressed god of fertility is not a good prospect

for the welfare of the world, so he did it anyway.

And Freyr certainly was in a bad mood, but finally he told Skírnir how it was: that he had fallen in love with a giantess, and that such a love certainly was hopeless, since neither *aesir* nor *vanir* would like him to marry a giant.

Skírnir agreed that such a match might not be regarded as politically correct, but their were occasions when correctness had to be put aside, and this was evidently such a moment. He offered to ride to Jotunheimr himself to solve the problem, if Freyr would just give him a horse - and his sword, which was a good one indeed, for it would swing itself if the person who carried it had some courage. (Very useful to a god who would really rather make love than war.)

Freyr agreed. Skírnir put the sword in his belt, sat up on the horse and rode his way to Jotunheimr, to Gymir's estate and to Gerdhr's place. Angry hounds were fettered outside her dwelling, and Skírnir had to ask a herdsman sitting there to help him pass them. The good man thought Skírnir must have strong suicidal tendencies to want to meet Gerdhr, and didn't want to help him.

Skírnir then made much noice, which was herd by Gerdhr, who kindly invited him to enter, though she feared who it might be - there was en eternal feud between Jotunheimr and Asgardhr, and it might be the god who had killed her own brother.

Somewhat appeased she was, when she found that the guest was not one of the *aesir*, nor of the *vanir* or *álfar*, but just a servant. She offered him mead, as hospitality demanded, and asked him what had brought him here.

Skírnir answered with much eloquence that his master Freyr asked for Gerdhr's hand in marriage, or at least an agreeable meeting. Eleven golden apples she would get to buy her consent. Gerdhr wasn't that easy to buy, though.

Then Skírnir offered a higher price: Odhinn's ring *Draupnir*, from which eight other rings, as big and heavy as itself, would drop each ninth night. Gerdhr still wasn't impressed.

So Skírnir tried another tactics. He showed her Freyr's sword, and said that if Gerdhr refused to meet its master, he - Skírnir - would use it to cut off her head. Gerdhr answered that this would be a good argument only if he could really do it, which she doubted; but it would be a good amusement to have a combat between Skírnir and her father.

Skírnir then presented a few more arguments. He said that when he had killed Gerdhr (he didn't discuss wheether he would actually be able to do it), she would as all wicked dead be sent to Hel, which wasn't a nice place at all. Her food there would sicken her more than snakes sicken humans, and her drink would be goats' piss. Anyone could stare at her as he liked. Ghosts would torment her. Her husband, if any, would be a six-headed *thurs*, whom it would not be good to behold, named Hrímgrimnir and possibly being the ghost of Ymir's son Thrúdhgelmir. At last he gave a nice poetic form to a most devilish malediction,

promising her the eternal enmity of all the gods.

Gerdhr must have been fond of poetry, for now her heart finally softened. She offered Skírnir another cup of mead and told him how unexpected it was for her to have won the love of such an august god as Freyr.

So she and Skírnir now agreed on the time and place for the meeting of her and Freyr - after nine nights, in a grove called Barri.

There was a last catch, though: her price would be Freyr's sword. So the god of love had his will, but he will pay it dearly at *ragnarökr*, when the lack of his sword will cause his death.

Baldr's Death

Our forefathers seem to have understood that, since evil exists, a really powerful god cannot be very good, and a really good god cannot be very powerful - a wisdom that monotheists have forgotten.

Perhaps they understood, at least in their best moments, that it is better to worship goodness, even if powerless, than an almighty god; for might has no merit, and power can never be good.

It is told that Baldr was best of all *aesir*, wisest, most eloquent and most compassionate; but most powerful was his father, Odhinn - and most treacherous, as are all war-gods, for good luck in war can never be trusted. It is told that Baldr's advice was always good, but that none of his judgments ever hold or come true. Thus the world looks like it does.

Baldr was cherished by all gods. Therefore, they all were worried when he began to have evil dreams, and told them about it. So worried they were that Odhinn himself saddled Sleipnir and went down to the country of the dead, to Hel. There he searched a departed seeress, and exercised one of his special skills - to force dead people to speak, and to disclose their secrets. She told him that in Hel, a place was prepared for Baldr, and that mead had been brewed for him; that he would soon arrive, through the actions of his own brother, but that he should also soon be revenged.

Odhinn was not appeased. Uncertain whether he had talked to a genuin seeress, or if it had once again been Loki in disguise (one never knew for certain about him), he returned to Asgardhr.

It was obvious that Baldr was in grave danger. Even gods are subject to the decisions of the norns, but still everything had to be tried to save him; so Frigg, Baldr's mother and Odhinn's wife, traveled around and asked all things - fire and water, iron and other metals, stones, earth, trees, illnesses, beasts, birds, poison, and serpents - to promise by a holy oath not to hurt her son. Since Baldr was loved by all, this promise was everywhere given.

Thereby, the problem seemed to be solved, and the gods decided to amuse themselves, as gods use to. They all gathered and began to shoot their arrows at Baldr, and to throw at him spears, stones and everything; but nothing hurt him.

But one there was who didn't love Baldr - Odhinn's foster-brother Loki, who had long lived among gods but remained a giant at heart. In disguise he approached Frigg and asked her if she had really asked promises from all things, so Baldr would be completely safe. Frigg answered yes, with only one insignificant exception: west of Valhalla she had seen growing a tender mistletoe (*mistilteinn*), and it had seemed to her to young to be sworn in.

This was enough for Loki. Off he went, plucked the mistletoe and made out of it an arrow. Then he approached Baldr's blind brother Hodhr, who stood at a side without doing anything, and asked him why he didn't amuse himself like the others by shooting at Baldr. Hodhr answered that it was because he couldn't see to shoot or throw. Loki was immediately at his service, gave him the mistletoe arrow, and helped him to direct his bow - and this arrow, of all missiles the only one who could do it, entered Baldr's heart and sent his soul to Hel.

Great was the consternation of the gods, for this was the greatest misfortune ever to happen to gods or to men. They were struck dumb and looked at each other, but nobody moved a finger to lift Baldr up. They all knew who had done it, but they could not take vengeance then and there, for the place was too sacred.

But magnificent was the funeral they gave the departed *áss*. His body was brought to his ship, called *Hringhorni*. It should be sent to sea and put on fire, but no one could move it. The gods had to sent for the giantess Hyrrokkin, who came riding on a wolf with an adder as rein. She had to push just once, and the ship went to sea. Now Thórr was an honest soul, but he didn't like to see another - and a giant at that - succeed where he had failed, and his temper was always short, so he gripped at Mjollnir and would have crushed her head, had not the other *aesir* appealed for her.

When Baldr's body was laid on the funeral pyre, the heart of his faithful wife Nanna burst, and her body, too, was put in the ship; so was Baldr's horse. Odhinn offered to his dead son his golden ring Draupnir, source of infinite wealth. In Baldr's ear he whispered something; and what were his words to his son at that moment is one of the eternal riddles, for he told nobody.

Finally Thórr blessed the ship with his hammer, and it started to burn.

Still, the gods did not give up quite yet. Odhinn had another son, called Hermódhr. He was sent to Hel, and told to do everything he could to bring Baldr back to the land of the living. Nine days and nine nights he rode, through dark valleys and across the river of the dead. He arrived safely in Hel, and he saw Baldr being there and being well treated, such as his father had been told would occur.

Hermódhr talked to Hel. She wasn't used to let those she had received go back,

but she said that for Baldr she would indeed make an exception, at one condition: if every being and every thing in the world, both dead and alive, would weep for Baldr, to prove he was as loved as was said, she would release him.

The gods were jubilant, for surely this would be no problem. Same as when they had asked all things not to hurt Baldr, now they asked them all to weep for him; and they all willingly agreed - *aesir*, *vanir*, *álfar*, dwarves, giants, men, animals, plants, stones, iron and all the metals, even earth itself; literally everything.

Again with one exception, this time through now fault of those who asked. An old giantess they met, sitting in a cave. She said her name was Thökk; and dry tears would she shed for Baldr, she said, for no joy had he given to her.

One there was who didn't love Baldr, and Loki was a master of disguises. One being alone refused to weep for Baldr, but that was enough. He had to remain in Hel, and their he will stay till *ragnarökr*. Then he will come back in glory, but only after his violent and treacherous father, and all those gods who have actually exercised power, have died.

To get Baldr back was not possible. Remained to revenge him.

Two beings were behind his death. The hand who killed him was Hodhr's, but the mind behind the hand was Loki's. But all the gods had a share in the guilt, for their foolish game had given Loki his opportunity.

Hodhr had killed his brother unwittingly, but revenge was still a sacred duty. But who would exercise it? Best it would be if the stone were thrown by someone without guilt; so Odhinn decided to make one.

A giant maiden there was, named Rindr. To her Odhinn went, and though she was much guarded by kith and kin, his cunningness was greater, and he managed to have a night with her. Nine months later was born a boy, named Váli. Just one night old, without first washing his hand or combing his hair, he sent Hodhr to Hel.

But from there, after *ragnarökr*, Hodhr will accompany Baldr back to the living.

So much about Hodhr. But what about Loki? Long had he been suffered among gods, sometimes useful but mostly not; but this was the last straw.

The gods met at Aegir's hall in till sea for a feast as usual, and perhaps to discuss what to do; and there, in a final act of supreme impertinence, suddenly and uninvited appeared the murderer.

Odhinn and Frigg were there, but not Thórr - he had gone eastwards and was busy killing trolls. Sif, his wife, was there, as well as Bragi and his wife Idhunn, and the one-handed Tyr. Njordhr was there, and his wife Skadhi, although she didn't like the sea, and his children Freyr and Freyja, and finally Odhinn's son Vídharr.

The *aesir* were, for natural reasons, not willing to let Loki sit down and have a

drink; but Loki addressed Odhinn, reminding him of the occasion when the two, at the beginning of time, had mixed their blood, thus entering a sworn brotherhood, and how Odhinn then had sworn that he would never taste beer or mead unless it was given to both.

In spite of the circumstanstances that was an argument, and Odhinn asked Vídharr to get up and serve Loki.

So he did; but instead of giving thanks, Loki started systematically insulting all the gods. He blamed Bragi for being a coward in battle; Idhunn for having slept with her brother's killer; Odhinn for judging battles wrongly and giving victory to the party who less deserved it, and for practicing magic permissable only to women; Frigg for having slept with her two brothers-in-law Vili and Vé; Freyja for having done the same to all the gods and elves present, her own brother not excluded; Njordhr for having had his mouth used as a chamber-pot by Hymir's maids; Tyr for not being the real father of his son, since Loki had himself paid a visit to his wife; and Freyr for being so fond of women that he had given his sword for a meeting. He reminded Skadhi that he himself had been instrumental when her father lost his life.

Loki had, at an earlier stage, been capable of more subtle ways of expression than that; but he probably understood that his time was running out, and decided to try a violent attack as last defense.

Finally Sif filled a horn with mead, gave it to Loki and asked him at least not to say anything bad about her. He drank and said she would have been the only goddess faithful to her husband - if he, Loki, had not once managed to seduce her.

At that time Thórr arrived. He didn't like that last line, and threatened Loki with his hammer; but Loki reminded him of the time they had both hidden in Skrymir's mitten, and how Thórr had not been able to open the giant's bag.

However, when Thórr had said a few more well chosen words, Loki left, for he knew the force of Mjollnir; but before leaving, he told Aegir that this would be the last feast in his halls.

The gods let him go, for it was a sacred duty not to attack a guest in one's own house; but a few days later, they began to search for him. He had fled to a cataract called *Fránangrs foss*, and there he spent part of his time in the guise of a salmon, swimming upstreams and downstreams.

Once, when in human form, he began to ponder how the gods would be able to catch someone as him; and then he finally gave something useful to mankind, though not out of a good heart, for he invented the first fishing-net.

At that time, he suddenly saw the *aesir* approaching; he hurried to throw the net in the fire, jump into the stream and transform himself into a salmon. But when the gods arrived, the net had left traces in the cinders, and they understood what that meant, so they made a new net and set about to use it.

They stepped into the river and walked downstreams, some gods at one shore and the rest at the other. But Loki the salmon stayed between two stones, and the net passed over him.

The gods felt this, put weights on the bottom of the net and tried again. Loki swam in front of the net till they reached the river-mouth. Then he didn't want to enter salt water, so he turned and jumped over the net. The gods also turned and followed him upstreams, but this time Thórr walked in the middle of the stream, and the other gods at both shores; so when they came to a place where Loki couldn't pass, and he jumped over the net again, Thórr caught him; but even so, he had to pinch Loki's tail really hard to prevent him from slipping.

And since then, all salmons have a narrow tail.

This was the end of Loki's freedom, and he knew it. Again in human form, he was brought to a cave, laid down on three vertical rocks - one under his shoulders, one under his hips, and one under his knees - and fettered with the intestines of one of his own sons, to stay there till *ragnarökr*. Over him was placed a snake, and the snake's venom was dripping in his face, causing to him much suffering.

But his faithful wife Sigyn came to him. She is standing all the time holding a bowl over his face to catch the venom, thus somewhat alleviating his pain. But from time to time the bowl gets full, and she must go aside and empty it.

At such moments, nothing can prevent the venom from falling into Loki's face. Then he shudders and quakes, and the earth with him. That is the reason for earthquakes.

The World Disappears

Our world is not eternal, and neither are its gods. They have arisen, and they will pass away.

It is true that our gods are said to be extremely longlived; but their longevity is not unconditional. They don't show any signs of aging as long as they eat regularly an apple of Idhunn's a day, but if they can't do that, their youth is in danger. And as shown by Baldr's example, they are not immune to violent death.

Old Norse mythology doesn't say anything about a first cause, just about a beginning of *our* universe; it tells also how our universe will end, and how a new universe will arise with a fresh beginning, but it is not clear how long that new world will remain.

A benevolent omnipotence is impossible, as proved by the existence of evil, and no god is perfect. Our gods have their desires and hatreds. They have made serious mistakes. They have given oaths they have not been able to keep, and perjury is a heavy burden for a god (if not for human rulers).

The master-builder who made the wall around Asgardhr was promised a pay it

would have meant disaster to give him, and was cheated with Loki's help; and when Loki in his turn had killed Baldr, Odhinn finally couldn't keep his sworn brotherhood with him any more.

Since Loki finally got his punishment, the official representative of evil is fettered - but evil still is rampant. In fighting evil with evil means, the forces of good have themselves been marked by evil.

And such god, such man. Followers of lords of hosts will seldom know peace.

Our world is plagued by wars. The gods themselves fought the first one, between *aesir* and *vanir*, and as they later contend in vain against their own stupidity, sinking deeper and deeper in corruption and become more and more difficult to distinguish from the evil forces they purport to fight, our world will approach its end.

A preliminary sign will be colder and longer winters, at the same time as warfare is escalating. (Perhaps our forefathers had inherited some memories of how the climate in Norhern Europe worsened when Bronze Age finished and Iron Age began, when people got less food and, at the same time, more efficient weapons? In any case, iron is in many stories regarded as a curse as well as a blessing. Or did they have even older memories, from the Ice Age which ended ten thousand years ago? We do not know.)

At last, there will be three years in a row with neither spring nor summer - just an unbroken winter, called *fimbulvetr*. Brother will fight against brother, cousin against cousin. Whoring will be common. No one will spare another. The hell-hound Garmr will bark violently at the cave called *Gnípahellir*.

Odhinn will be brooding. He will take counsel from Mímir's head a last time, and he will send his valkyries to battle-fields to recruite the fallen heroes to his army.

The dragon called *Nidhhoggr* will suck the bodies of the dead, and Fenrir will tear them and spew out their blood, making all air red. Three cocks will cry: the read rooster Fjalar for the giants, Gullinkambi for Odhinn's warriors, and a third one in Hel.

The signal for the final battle with come when Heimdallr blows a last time in the *Gjallarhorn*. Yggdrasill the Ash, the cosmical tree itself, will quake and wimper. The Midhgardhr Serpent will whip the waves in giant fury. Fenrir will finally get loose, and so vill Loki his parent. He and many other giants will come to the battle in a ship called *Naglfar*.

This ship is made of unclipped nails from dead bodies. Therefore it is important that undertakers, or whoever take care of corpses, cut their nails and dispose of the clippings. Thereby, they might postpone *ragnarökr*, because it can't take place until the ship is ready.

Other giants will come from all directions, over land and sea. Some will ride

over the bridge *Bifrost*, the rainbow, which will shatter under their weight.

The last war, the war to end all wars - and all who fight it - will take place. Odhinn will fight against Fenrir. The father of *aesir* will be devoured by the beast, but his son Vídharr will immediately revenge him, putting his left foot on the wolf's lower jaw, gripping its upper jaw with one hand and thrusting his sword through its heart with the other.

Freyr will fight against Surtr; but since he was careless enough to give his good sword away for Gerdhr, he will die in the battle, killed with the very sword he has lost.

Thórr will meet the Midhgardhr Serpent a last time, and kill it with Mjollnir; but before breathing its last, the serpent will spit so much venom at him that he will take just nine steps away from it, and then fall down dead.

The one-armed Tyr and the hell-hound Garmr will meat and kill each other.

Loki will meet Heimdallr. Heimdallr will swing his sword and cut Loki's head from his body, but the head will rebound from the ground and kill its killer; and that will be the end of the last of the old gods, except those few who are still innocent enough to survive this age.

Surtr will burn earth and sky. The sun will blacken, the earth sink in the sea, the stars fall from heaven. Fog will rise, and fire.

Cold and heat, as when our world arose - and now a new world will come into being. The leading gods of the old world are dead, for ever it seems; but Baldr and his brother Hodhr will come back to life, and give their benevolence to the new world. Two sons of Odhinn's and two of Thórr's will survive - Vídharr and Váli, Magni and Módhi - as well as Odhinn's brother Hoenir.

Two human beings, Líf the girl and Lífthrasir the boy, have been elected long ago to survive as the only ones among our present mankind. They will be the parents of the new human race, same as Askr and Embla were for ours. The fields will grow without being sown. The surviving gods - those who didn't have much power in the old world - will meat and remember.

What will then happen in, and to, this new world is not told. It is said that it will remain for ever, but that may be a pious wish rather than a certainty. Whether our forefathers were themselves aware of it or not, they mention some details that seem to indicate that even the new world will not be quite perfect: an eagle will be catching fish, which means that life will still be nurtured by life and killing will not stop; and Magni will inherit Thórr's hammer, which is a tool of violence, used to knock heads rather than nails, and of little use in a completely peaceful world.

It is also indicated, at the end of the *Völuspá*, that a new god will come, and that he will be very powerful. Readers who believe that omnipotence can be benevolent may regard this as something good, but others might think it to be ominous, since it was power that corrupted the old gods in our time. It is not clear how our

forefathers saw it; but a cyclical world-view is not uncommon in Indo-European cultures, so it is quite possible that the new world will end just like this one, and so on *ad infinitum*.

In any case, we will not live to see it. Our lot will not be life eternal, but the honour of giving our lives in light's struggle against darkness.

If we so elect.

Explanation of Names and Terms

Adam of Bremen: 11th century German historian, author of a history of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen (*Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, written in the 1070:s; English translation by F. J. Tschan, Columbia University Press, New York 1959).

Aegir: A sea giant, friendly to the gods, whom he often invited to parties; husband of Rán.

aesir (singular form **áss**): One of the two main families of gods, including Odhinn, Thórr, and Tyr, connected with magic and force.

álfar: Elves, a group of beings almost equal to gods.

Alfheimr: Home of the elves, but also mentioned as home of Freyr.

Angrbodha: Co-parent with Loki (the terms "father" and "mother" are difficult to apply, since *she* fertilized *him* when she had been three times burnt to death and he ate her scorched heart) of the Midhgardhr Serpent, the wolf Fenrir, and the death-goddess Hel. Possibly identical with Gullveig.

Asgardhr: Home of the *aesir*.

Askr: "Ash Tree", the first man, created from a tree (presumably an ash).

áss: Singular form of **aesir**.

asura: In Indian mythology, the asuras were a group of beings somewhat similar to the Greek titans or Old Norse giants, in constant conflict with the devas. (In Persian religion, this relation was turned upside down, so the gods were called "ahuras" and the demons "daevas".)

at-Tartushi, Ibrahim bin Ya'qub: A Jewish-Arabic-Spanish merchant from Córdoba, who visited Denmark in the middle of the 10th century.

Audhhumbla: The primeval cow, who came into being spontaneously (born, not created), when heat met cold, and who made the first *áss* Búri by licking him out of some frost-covered, salty stones.

Aurgelmir: Other name for Ymir.

Baldr: Son of Odhinn and Frigg, husband of Nanna, father of Forseti, killed by his brother Hodhr at the instigation of Loki, will come back at *ragnarökr*.

Baldrs draumar: "The Dreams of Baldr", a poem in the Poetic Edda, describing how Odhinn went to Hel and forced a departed seeress to interpret Baldr's bad dreams.

Bergelmir: Son of Thrúdhgelmir, grandson of Ymir.

Bifrost: Bridge of the gods, probably identical with the rainbow, but Snorri says it is the Milky Way.

Bragi: God of poets and poet of gods, husband of Idhunn.

Brísingamen: Freyja's necklace, obtained from the dwarves.

Búri: First of the *aesir*, who came into being when the primeval cow Audhhumbla licked some frost-covered, salty stones; father of Burr, grandfather of Odhinn.

Burr: Son of Búri, father of Odhinn.

Codex Regius: Most important manuscript of the Poetic Edda, made during the later part of the 13th century, now in Copenhagen.

deva: Sanskrit and Pali word often translated by "god", and etymologically identical with Latin *deus* and Greek *theos*; in Hinduism, *devas* are generally regarded as immortal, but in Buddhism as neither immortal nor necessarily very wise, which is an interesting parallel to the idea in Old Norse religion that the gods are both mortal and corruptible.

dísir: A group of nameless female divinities, connected with fertility, regarded as patrons of the individual family.

Donar: German analogue of Thórr.

Draupnir: Ring of Odhinn, made by dwarves; from it eight other rings of the same size and weight as itself will drop each ninth night.

Dumézil, Georges: French comparative religionist, 1898-1986, who worked extensively with the relations between different Indo-European religions, especially Old Norse and Indo-Arian.

Edda, Poetic: A collection of late pre-Christian poems about gods and heroes.

Edda, Prose: Book by Snorri Sturluson, intended as handbook for poets, containing valuable material about Old Norse mythology.

Elli: Said to be Utgardhar-Loki's foster-mother, with whom Thórr had to wrestle, but actually old age itself, so she won.

Embla: Perhaps "Elm Tree", the first woman, created from a tree (possibly an elm).

Fenrir: A mighty wolf, son of Loki, fettered by the *aesir* and at that occasion biting off the right hand of Tyr; will at ragnarökr devour Odhinn and be killed by Vídharr.

Fimbulvetr: An extremely harsh winter lasting for three years without interruption, will precede *ragnarökr*.

Fjorgynn: Name of the earth as mother of Thórr.

Forseti: Son of Baldr and Nanna, god of justice, worshipped in Frisia but not much elsewhere.

Freyja: Chief of the female *vanir*, goddess of fertility and love, daughter of Njordhr, sister of Freyr.

Freyr: Chief of the male *vanir*, god of fertility, one of the three gods most worshipped in public cult (together with Thórr and Odhinn), son of Njordhr, brother of Freyja.

Frigg: Wife of Odhinn, connected with fertility, together with Freyja helper of women in labour.

fylgias: Female guardian divinities, connected to the family, usually inherited from father to son.

Garmr: Hound of the underworld, will at *ragnarökr* break loose and kill Tyr, and himself be killed by him.

Gerdhr: Giant maiden loved by Freyr, who for her sake gave up his sword, the loss of which will be his death at *ragnarökr*.

Ginnungagap: Primeval void, in which the universe arose.

Gjallarbrú: "Echoing bridge" between Hel and the land of living.

Gjallarhorn: "Resounding horn", owned by Heimdallr and used by him to warn the gods of danger, will be used to announce *ragnarökr*.

Gullinbursti: "Golden-Bristled", boar of Freyr, made by dwarves.

Gullveig: ("Gold-drink" or "Gold-drunkenness"): Evil woman who sowed discord between *aesir* and *vanir*, and caused the war between them; three times burnt to death by the gods but still alive; possibly identical with Angrbodha.

Gungnir: Spear of Odhinn, made by dwarves.

Gymir: A giant, father of Gerdhr.

Hafthi: Son of Thjálfi/Thjelvar, first inhabitant of Gotland.

Hávamál: A poem in the Poetic Edda, purported to be the words of Odhinn, containing aphorisms and some details about his life.

Heimdallr: Called "the white áss", and said to be "born of nine mothers"; father of the tree estates - thralls, freeborn, and highborn; guardian of the gods.

Heimskringla: "Round of the World", Chronicle by Snorri Sturluson, dealing with very early Swedish and not quite as early Norwegian kings.

Hel: 1. Goddess of death, daughter of Loki; 2. Country of the dead, especially of those that died without honour.

Hermódhr: A son of Odhinn, who rode to Hel to get Baldr back after the latter's death.

Hildisvín: "Battle Pig", boar of Freyja.

Hlidhskjálf: A tower in Asgardhr, owned by Odhinn, who therefrom could see all the worlds; once used by Freyr, with disastrous results.

Hodhr: Son of Odhinn, brother of Baldr, whom he unwittingly killed, to be himself killed in revenge by Váli; in Hel reconciled with his victim, together with whom he will return after *ragnarökr*.

Hoenir: One of the *aesir*, possibly identical with one of Odhinn's brothers, in any case helping him to create the first human couple; after the war between *aesir* and *vanir* sent to the latter as exchange hostage, and elected chief of the *vanir*, with very bad results; probably the only god of his generation who will survive *ragnarökr*.

Hrungnir: A giant who competed with Odhinn in a horse-race, ended up in Asgardhr, insulted the *aesir* and had to duel with Thórr, to be killed by him; se also **Mokkrkálfi**.

Hugi: Purported to be a boy, against whom Thórr's servant Thjálfi had to compete to see who could run fastest, but actually thought itself, so he won.

Huginn: "Thought", one of Odhinn's ravens.

Hymir: A giant, foster-father of Tyr, visited by him and Thórr, having more or less by force to give his best pot to them and then killed by Thórr, when trying to take the pot back.

Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah: Arab travellers in the 10th century, who met Swedes in Russia and described their practices.

Idhunn: Wife of Bragi, keeper of the apples that prevented the gods from aging.

Indra: Indian analogue of Thórr.

Jordh: The earth, especially as mother of Thórr.

Jotunheimr: Home of many giants, east of the world of men.

Kvásir: In Heimskringla said to have been created from the united spittle of *aesir*

and *vanir* when they made peace after their war, in the Prose Edda said to have been sent as hostage from the *vanir* to the *aesir* after that war in exchange for Mímir; travelled widely among men to teach them wisdom, and was killed by two dwarves who mixed his blood with honey, and so made the mead of poets.

Líf and Lífthrasir: "Life" and "Life-longing" (?), a girl and a boy elected by the gods to survive *ragnarökr* and to found a new human race afterwards.

Lódhurr: One of the *aesir*, possibly identical with one of Odhinn's brothers, in any case helping him to create the first human couple.

Logi: Purported to be a man, against whom Loki had to compete to see who could eat most and fastest, but actually fire itself, so he won.

Loki: A giant, who at the beginning of time entered a sworn brotherhood with Odhinn and lived among the *aesir*, whom he sometimes helped; but naughty to begin with, he became more and more evil; at last he arranged the death of Baldr, and prevented his coming back from Hel; therefore punished by the gods by being fettered in a cave with his own son's intestines; will come loose at *ragnarökr*, lead the evil forces and fight against Heimdallr, and the two will kill each other.

Magni: A son of Thórr, will survive *ragnarökr* and inherit his hammer.

Midhgardhr: "Middle Earth", the land of men, midway between gods and giants.

Midhgardhr Serpent (*Midhgardhsormr*): A big snake, offspring of Loki, when growing too much thrown into the sea by the gods, thereafter continuing to grow, now surrounding all the earth; at *ragnarökr*, he and Thórr will kill each other.

Mímir: A primeval giant, counsellor of the *aesir*, guardian of the well of wisdom; at the war between *aesir* and *vanir* sent as hostage to the latter together with Hoenir, there decapitated, and his head sent back to the *aesir*; there it was prepared by Odhinn, who is still making good use of its counsels, and will do so a last time just before *ragnarökr*.

mistletoe (*mistilteinn*): The only plant not asked to promise not to hurt Baldr, therefore used by Loki as material for the arrow that killed him.

Mjollnir: The hammer of Thórr, used by him to fight evil, made by dwarves, will when thrown always hit its goal and then return to its user, will after *ragnarökr* be

inherited by Magni; used as general symbol of the Old Norse religion, at least during the last centuries of its existence.

Módhi: A son of Thórr, will survive *ragnarökr* together with his brother Magni.

Mokkrkálfi: "Mist-Calf", a super-giant made of clay by Hrungnir to assist him in a double combat against Thórr and Thjálfi, nine leagues tall and three leagues broad under his arms, but with the heart of a mare and completely without courage, immediately killed by Thjálfi.

Muninn: "Memory", one of Odhinn's ravens.

Múspellheimr: Place of heat, south of Ginnungagap.

Naglfar: A ship made of dead people's unclipped nails, will bring Loki and many giants to battle against the gods at *ragnarökr*.

Nanna: Wife of Baldr.

Nerthus: A fertility goddess among southern Germanic peoples; her name is etymologically identical with *Njordhr*.

Nidhhoggr: A serpent or dragon lying at the foot of Yggdrasill and gnawing its roots; at *ragnarökr*, he will leave his place and suck the bodies of the dead.

Níflheimr: A place of ice and frost, north of Ginnungagap; also described as place of darkness under the roots of Yggdrasill.

Njordhr: Father of Freyr and Freyja (being the only three *vanir* actually named), husband first of his own sister (no name given, Freyr's and Freyja's mother), later of Skadhi.

norns: The three goddesses of fate, named Urdhr, Verdandi, and Skuld.

Odhinn: Supreme god in classical times, god of war, worshipped by high warriors, but also a deep brooder and searcher of wisdom, expert of *seidhr*; one of the three gods most worshipped in public cult (together with Thórr and Freyr, but less popular than these two); son of Burr, grandson of Búri; one of three gods who made our world out of Ymir's corpse; one of three gods who created the first human couple; at *ragnarökr* he will be devoured by Fenrir, and immediately revenged by

Vídharr.

Odhr: Husband of Freyja.

Olaf Haraldsson: Norwegian king 1016-1030, great enemy of Old Norse religion, pious Christian and mass murderer, regarded as a saint by both Catholics and Orthodox (he died before they split, and his reputation was established before the former got the institution of *Advocatus Diaboli*, which pope John Paul II has unfortunately abolished, though this case should have shown him how very necessary it is), venerated by Protestants as well, hailed as christianizer of Norway and Gotland, patron saint of Norway, Gotland, and parts of Sweden, died as a "martyr" at the battle of Stiklarstadhir in 1030 while waging a war of aggression, to regain a throne from which his compatriots had been very glad to see him ousted two years earlier; has given his name to many churches, and to Gotland's mental hospital.

Olaf Tryggvasson: Norwegian king 995-1000, great enemy of Old Norse religion, pious Christian and mass murderer, hailed as christianizer of Iceland, although Christian authors like Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus regarded him as Anti-Christ.

ragnarökr, earlier **ragnarok:** The end of this world, with a last battle between good and evil, where all the great gods will die together with their foes.

Rán: A sea goddess, wife of Aegir.

Ratatoskr: A squirrel who is running up and down the Yggdrasill, sowing discord between the serpent at its roots and the eagle in its crown.

Rígsthula: A poem in the Poetic Edda about how Heimdallr, under the name of Ríg, fathered the three estates.

Roskva: The sister of Thjálfi.

Saxo Grammaticus: 12th century Danish scholar and ecclesiastic, author of a history of the Danes (*Gesta danorum*; English translation by Lord Elton, Folklore Society, 1894).

seidhr: Old Norse shamanism, said to be invented by Freyja; **seidhr** was a female monopoly, and men who practiced it were looked down upon, but Odhinn was an

expert.

Sif: Thórr's wife.

Sigyn: Loki's wife.

Skadhi: Daughter of the giant Thjazi, after his death wife of Njordhr.

Skídhbladhnir: Freyr's ship, made by dwarves, can be folded and put in a pouch, will travel over land and sea and always have a fair wind.

Skírnir: Freyr's servant, who helped him meet Gerdhr at the cost of his sword.

Skuld: One of the norns.

Sleipnir: Odhinn's eight-legged horse, son of Loki.

Snorri Sturluson: Icelandic writer and politician (1179-1241), Christian but using Old Norse mythology for literary purposes and giving valuable information about it in the Prose Edda, author also of Heimskringla.

Surtr: A giant, ruler of Myrkvidhr (Mirkwood), will kill Freyr at *ragnarökr* and then burn earth and sky.

Svadhilfari: A stallion, father of Sleipnir, having been seduced by Loki in the guise of a mare.

Tacitus: Roman historian, living at the end of the first century A. D., deeply interested in the Germanic way of life; author of "On the origin and geography of Germania", written in 98.

Thjálfi or Thjelvar: Given by his father as servant of Thórr, as compensation for his mistake of having cleft his he-goat's bone; accompanied him to Utgardhar-Loki; assisted Thórr in his combat with Hrungnir and Mokkrkálfi, and killed the latter; brought fire to Gotland, and thereby stopped it from sinking in the sea every morning, thus making it inhabitable; brother of Roskva, father of Hafthi.

Thjazi: A giant, father of Skadhi, instigated Loki to lure Idhunn and her apples away from the gods, was killed by Thórr, who threw his eyes into the sky, where they can be seen as two bright stars.

Thjelvar: Gotlandic form of **Thjálfi**.

Thökk: An old woman - believed to have been Loki in disguise - who refused to weep for Baldr, thus making his return to the land of the living impossible.

Thórr: The god of thunder, may have been high god at an earlier stage, in classical times regarded as son of Odhinn; together with him and Freyr dominating the public cult; very popular among common people, but venerated also by the high-ups; at *ragnarökr*, Thórr and the Midhgardhr Serpent will kill each other.

Thrúdhgelmir: Son of Ymir, father of Bergelmir.

Thrúdvangar: Estate of Thórr.

Thrymr: A giant who stole Thórr's hammer.

Thunor: Anglo-Saxon analogue of Thórr.

Tiwas: German analogue of Tyr.

Tyr: One of the *aesir*, a god of war, probably older than Odhinn in cult but held to be younger in the classical myths; sacrificed his right hand to have Fenrir fettered; at *ragnarökr*, Tyr and the hell-hound Garmr will kill each other.

Ullr: One of the *aesir*, great skier and bowman.

Urdhr: One of the norns.

Utgardhr: The land of giants, the region outside and around Midhgardhr; the term is also used for an estate in Jotunheimr, owned by Utgardhar-Loki.

Utgardhar-Loki: A giant visited by Thórr, Loki and Thjálfi in the most famous story of Snorri's Edda.

Valhalla (Valholl): "Hall of the Slain", Odhinn's estate, where he receives the fallen heroes, where they have a good time feasting and fighting - in preparation for *ragnarökr*, when they will all fall again. If someone didn't have the opportunity to fall in battle, but wanted to go to Valhalla anyway, he could try to make it by getting a cut from the point of a spear just before he died, or - even better - hang

himself. If it worked, it worked.

Váli: Son of Odhinn and Rindr, begotten to revenge Baldr by killing Hodhr.

valkyries: "Choosers of the slain", divine female warriors, servants of Odhinn.

Vanaheimr: Home of the *vanir*.

vanir: One of the two main families of gods, including Njordhr, Freyr, and Freyja, connected with fertility.

Vé: Son of Burr, brother of Odhinn, one of three gods who made our world out of Ymir's corpse.

Verdandi: One of the norns.

Vídharr: Son of Odhinn, will revenge his father at *ragnarökr* by killing Fenrer; one of the few gods that will survive *ragnarökr*; according to Dumézil, his name is etymologically connected with Sanskrit *Vishnu*.

Vili: Son of Burr, brother of Odhinn, one of three gods who made our world out of Ymir's corpse.

Völuspá: "The Seeress' Prophecy", a poem in the Poetic Edda, purported to be the words of a departed seeress forced by Odhinn to describe the beginning and the end of our world.

Wodan, Wotan or Wuotan: German analogue of Odhinn.

Yggdrasill: The world tree, a mighty ash.

Ymir: The primeval giant, who came into being spontaneously (born, not created), when heat met cold. He was later killed, and from his corpse our world was made.

Pronounciation of Old Norse names

Modern Icelandic has changed marvelously little during the past thousand years, and it is much more easy for an Icelander today to read the original versions of Snorri's texts than for an Englishman to read the ones of Chaucer's. However, as in many conservative languages, the similarities in the written language may hide differences in the spoken one. If you happen to meet an Icelander, he will therefore probably pronounce the Old Norse names quite differently than did Snorri. For this reason, I will give first the Old Norwegian ("Old Icelandic") pronounciation, as far as we know anything about it, and then an approximation of the Modern Icelandic version, so you may have a chance to know what Icelandic lecturers are talking about.

Old Norwegian/Icelandic Pronounciation:

Vowels:

An accent over a vowel means that it is long, but that it has more or less the same quality as the short and unaccented one, same as in Hungarian or Czech (but not as Modern Icelandic).

a, e, i, o, and u are pronounced as in German, Italian, or Spanish, i. e.:

a: as in b<u>u</u>t

e: as in b<u>e</u>d

i: as in b<u>i</u>t; but in front of another vowel, it is a semivowel like in f<u>i</u>ord (and in later editions often replaced by j)

o: as in n<u>o</u>t

u: as in f<u>u</u>ll; but in front of another vowel, it is a semivowel like English w in <u>w</u>ind; in such a position, it can be replaced by v and pronounced as such

There are also some additional vowels:

y: as French or Dutch <u>u</u> or German <u>ü</u>

ö or oe: as French <u>eu</u> or German <u>ö</u>

ae: as in fair, without the diphtong, or as French bière; always long, even if not accented

Diphtongs:

au: as in bow

ei: as in maid

ey: more or less the same as ei, but - if you manage it - with the closing i-sound replaced by an ü.

Consonants:

Old Norse texts have two consonants not used elsewhere, with the exception of the modern phonetic alphabet. These are not included in the ASCII series, so I have not been able to use them in this book. I have replaced them with dh and th respectively.

dh: as English th in this

th: as English th in think

In older manuscripts, the letter for th is used for both sounds

(South Asian readers please note that I mean "English th" as the two phonemes are pronounced by British, Australian or American speakers, not the plosives which replace them in Indian or Ceylonese English.)

Other consonants:

f: as f when first letter, in front or after an unvoiced consonant and when doubled, but as v between vowels, when last letter or in front or after a voiced consonant

v: as either v or w (the difference is not important)

g: plosive and voiced as in English great when first letter, after n and when doubled; fricative and voiced as in Spanish Diego in other positions, except before unvoiced consonants; in such cases it is unvoiced and either plosive like k, or

fricative like in Spanish g̲eneral, depending on which comes most naturally

h: as in English, but pronounced even before consonants, such as H̲rungnir

j: like i in fi̲ord or y in y̲ou (in earlier manuscripts mostly written i̲)

l: as in most European languages (thinner than in English), but in some positions it is unvoiced as Welsh ll in L̲langol̲len

m: like in English

n: like in English, but thinner

r: rolled with the tip of the tongue, like in Scottish, Spanish, or Italian; but when last letter of a word (where the rune alphabet had a different sign for it) it might, at least at an early stage, have sounded as the final r in the *American* pronounciation of fathe̲r (the *British* muteness of that letter is a later evolution)

s: like in English, but always unvoiced

v: like in English

z: as English t̲s

Doubled consonants are pronounced long and simple consonants short, regardless whether the surrounding vowels are long or short. There is thus a difference between short, long, and double-long syllables, same as in Sanskrit, Pali, Ancient Greek, and Ancient Latin (but hardly in Church Latin or Modern English).

Modern Icelandic Pronounciation:

(Approximative hints - if you want exact instructions, you will have to listen to a native!)

Vowels and diphtongs:

In modern Icelandic, accents over vowels have changed to mean a difference in quality - not in quantity, as it did in the old language.

a: as in bu̲t, but in some positions long

á: like Old Icelandic au, or as in English bow

e: as in bed, but in some positions long

é: like y in you followed by a long e

i: between Old Icelandic i and e, long or short depending on position

í: like Old Icelandic i or í

o: like Old Icelandic o or ó

ó: diphtong of Old Icelandic o followed by English u in full; outside Iceland, this diphtong is also found in the Gotlandic dialect, but most other modern Scandinavians can't pronounce it, so don't worry too much!

u: a funny sound, long or short depending on the position, as far as i know to be found only in Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish (but in Swedish only the long one, and in some Swedish dialects not even that, e. g. those of Gotland and Finland); somewhat similar to English full and fool, but much more closed.

ú: as in full and fool, depending on position

y: an open i sound, long or short depending on position; if accented (which I can't do on my word processor, because whoever planned the ASCII series didn't realize that y is a vowel), a close i sound

ae: as in fight (or like the Ancient Latin pronunciation of Caesar, as preserved in German Kaiser, while the Old Icelandic pronounciation seems to have coincided with the Late Latin pronounciation of the same name, as preserved in Italian Cesare)

ö: as French eu, when long as in feu, when short more open

au: diphtong as in French feuille

ei: as in Old Icelandic

ey: same as ei

Consonants:

b, d, and g: *unvoiced*, but not aspirated, like p, t, and q in Italian, Spanish, or French; except when g is fricative, in which case it is pronounced more or less as in Old Icelandic

p, t, and k: unvoiced and aspirated, like the same letters in normal English; but k may sometimes in front of unvoiced consonants be pronounced as ch in Scottish loch or German Buch

d and t are pronounced, as in most European languages, "thinner" than in British or American English, somewhat similar to the Indian English unlisped and plosive pronounciation of th.

dh and th (sorry, I can't write the real letters - se my clarifications above): as in Old Icelandic, but in some positions, th is pronounced as dh

f: more or less as in Old Icelandic

h: normally as in English or Old Icelandic; but unlike the latter not so pronounced before consonants; hj, hl, hn, and hr are pronounced like unvoiced j, l (like Welsh ll in Llangollen), n, and r; hv is pronounced like either k as in English followed by v, or ch in Scottish loch or German Buch followed by w in wind, or just the ch sound, depending on the dialect,

j: like i in fiord or y in you

l: normally as in most European languages (thinner than in English), but in some positions it is unvoiced as Welsh ll in Llangollen

m: like in English

n: like in English, but thinner

ng: as in sing

r: rolled with the tip of the tongue, like in Scottish, Spanish, or Italian

rl: as rdl, with a rolling r

rn: as rdn, with a rolling r

rs: as English sh in English

s: like in English, but always unvoiced

v: like in English

z: abolished in modern orthography; when it was still used as ds, dhs, or ts, depending on position

Further Reading

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Contents: