

# GODS OF THE NORSE

## **Gods and giants**

The great enemies of the gods were the giants, and there were often conflicts between the two races. Among the gods, only Thor was a match for the giants in strength, so the gods usually had to rely on cunning to outwit the giants. Odin himself was capable of clever tricks, but whenever the gods needed a really cunning plan, they turned to the fire-god Loki. Like fire, which can bring necessary warmth or cause great destruction, Loki did many things that benefited the gods, but he also caused them great harm, and often the problems he solved had been caused by his mischief in the first place.

Despite the tension between gods and giants, there was a fair amount of contact on an individual basis, and a number of the gods had relationships with giantesses. One of these was Loki, who had three monstrous children by his giantess wife. His daughter Hel became ruler of the underworld. One son, Jormunagund, was a serpent who grew so large that he stretched all the way around the earth. The other son was Fenris, a wolf so powerful that he terrified the gods until they tricked him into allowing himself to be tied up with a magical chain which bound him until the end of time.

It was believed that the world would end with the final battle of Ragnarok, between the gods and the giants. Loki and his children would take the side of the giants. Thor and Jormunagund, who maintained a long-running feud with each other, would kill each other, and Odin would be killed by the Fenris wolf, who would then be killed in turn. A fire would sweep across the whole world, destroying both the gods and mankind. However, just enough members of both races would survive to start a new world.

# 1: ODIN: CUNNING, LORE, SPEAR

Odin is a god of war and death, but also the god of poetry and wisdom. He hung for nine days, pierced by his own spear, on the world tree. Here he learned nine powerful songs, and eighteen runes. Odin can make the dead speak to question the wisest amongst them. His hall in Asgard is Valaskjalf ("shelf of the slain") where his throne Hlidskjalf is located. From this throne he observes all that happens in the nine worlds.

The tidings are brought to him by his two raven Huginn and Muninn. He also resides in Valhalla, where the slain warriors are taken. The fallen, the einherjar, are assembled and entertained by Odin in order that they in return might fight for, and support, the gods in the final battle of the end of Midgard, Ragnarök.

Odin's attributes are the spear Gungnir, which never misses its target, the ring Draupnir, from which every ninth night eight new rings appear, and his eight-footed steed Sleipnir. He is accompanied by the wolves Freki and Geri, to whom he gives his food for he himself consumes nothing but wine. Odin has only one eye, which blazes like the sun. His other eye he traded for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, and gained immense knowledge. On the day of the final battle, Odin will be killed by the wolf Fenrir.

He is also called Othinn, Wodan and Wotan. Some of the aliases he uses to travel incognito among mortals are Vak and Valtam. Wednesday is named after him (Wodan).

Amongst his gifts to us, his children, was the greatest of all: the gift of writing. To accomplish this Odin hung himself upside down upon the World Tree, [Tree of Life] the gigantic ash Yggdrasil (a compound meaning "terrible horse").

After nine days of fasting and agony, in which "he made of himself a sacrifice to himself", he "fell screaming" from the tree, having had revealed to him in a flash of insight the secret of the runes. Their initial manifestation took the form of eighteen powerful charms for protection, increase, success in battle and love-making, healing, and mastery over natural causes.

## 2: THOR: MIGHT, SPIRIT, AIM

Thor is the Norse god of thunder. He is red-headed and bearded. He is a son of Odin and Jord, and one of the most powerful gods. The Norse believed that during a thunderstorm, Thor rode through the heavens on his chariot pulled by the goats Tanngrisni ("gap-tooth") and Tanngnost ("tooth grinder"). Lightning flashed whenever he threw his hammer Mjollnir. His greatest enemy is Jormungandr, the Midgard Serpent. At the day of Ragnarok, Thor will kill this serpent but will die from its poison. His sons will inherit his hammer after his death.

### 3: FREY: hunt, heal, AIM

Worshipped as a phallic fertility god, Frey bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. He rules over the rain, the shining of the sun and the produce of the fields. He rides the shining dwarf-made boar Gullinbursti and possesses the ship Skíðblaðnir which always has a favourable breeze and can be folded together and carried in a pouch when it is not being used.

### 4: NJORD: hunt, spirit, SPEAR

Njord is the god of wind, fertile land along the seacoast, as well as seamanship, sailing and fishing. The he has the power to calm the sea or fire.

### 5: HEIMDALL: ATHLETICS, cunning, SWORD

He is the watchman of the gods and guards Bifrost, the only entrance to Asgard, the realm of the gods.

It is Heimdall's duty to prevent the giants from forcing their way into Asgard. He requires less sleep than a bird and can see a hundred miles around him, by night as well as by day.

His hearing is so accurate that no sound escapes him: he can even hear the grass grow or the wool on a sheep's back. At the final conflict of Ragnarok he will kill his age-old enemy, the evil god Loki, but will die himself from his wounds.

Heimdall created the three races of mankind: the serfs, the peasants, and the warriors.

## 6: TYR: SPIRIT, INSIGHT, SPEAR

Tyr, Odin's son the god of single combat and heroic glory. A god of war, he is the boldest of the gods, who inspires courage and heroism in battle.

Tyr is represented as a man with one hand, because his right hand was bitten off by the gigantic wolf Fenrir (in old-Norse, the wrist was called 'wolf-joint').

His attribute is a spear; the symbol of justice, as well as a weapon.

At the day of Ragnarok, Tyr will kill the hound Garm, the guardian of the hell, but will die from the wounds inflicted by the animal.

## 7: BALDR: insight, GRACE, shield

The god of light, joy, purity, beauty, innocence, and reconciliation. Son of Odin and Frigg, he was loved by both gods and men and was considered to be the best of the gods. He had a good character, was friendly, wise and eloquent.

## 8: LOKI: cunning, ORATE, SWORD

The most unpredictable and certainly the most dangerous god in the Northern pantheon was Loki. His activities ran from the merely mischievous to the blatantly malicious. Supremely clever, Loki ensnared everyone in complicated problems, to which he always supplied a remedy - through his solution often engendered even greater troubles.

His parents were both giants (the perpetual enemies of the gods.)

Loki is an immensely powerful magician, and shares with Odin the ability to sex and shape shift at will.

It is Loki who begins the chain of events that leads to the destruction of the gods. He does this by causing the death of the

beautiful Baldr, Frigg's son, who in his goodness and perfection embodies the attainment of every desirable quality. Baldr's death plunges all of Asgard into mourning. Yet Loki feels no remorse, and in fact relishes every opportunity to exert his contrary nature.

Loki was chained to three large boulders; one under his shoulders, one under his loins and one under his knees. A poisonous snake was placed above his head. The dripping venom that lands on him is caught by Sigyn in a bowl. But every now and then, when the bowl is filled to the brim, she has to leave him to empty it. Then the poison that falls on Loki's face makes him twist in pain, causing earthquakes.

After Frigg had gone to great lengths to bring Baldr back to the land of the living by asking all beings to weep for his return, Loki (in the guise of an old female giant) steadfastly refused to shed a single tear for the slain god. Thus Baldr was consigned to the realms of the dead, under the governance of Lady Hel.

This loss of innocence represented by Baldr's death is the act that triggers Ragnarok, the end of all things. Ragnarok begins with famine and darkness and bitter cold - a winter lasting three entire years.

It ends with all creation becoming a flaming furnace. In the middle is staged the disastrous final battle in which the gods are arrayed against the powers of evil represented by the giants. Nearly everything and every body, in all realms, are destroyed. Loki fights against the gods, and is killed, as is Odin, Tyr, Frey, and Thor.

## 9: BRAGI: ORATE, music, shield

The god of eloquence and poetry, and the patron of skalds (poets). He is the son of Odin and Frigg. Runes were carved on his tongue and he inspired poetry in humans by letting them drink from the mead of poetry. Bragi is married to Idun, the goddess of eternal youth. Oaths were sworn over the Bragarfull ("Cup of Bragi"), and drinks were taken from it in honour of a dead king. Before a king ascended the throne, he drank from such a cup.

## 10: FREYJA: ATHLETICS, GRACE, AIM

Goddess of sex, battle, and pleasure, most beautiful and desirable of white-armed women, Freyja was sister to the male fertility god Frey. Freyja had unusual parity with Odin, for they divided the heroic dead amongst themselves. Half went to live eternally in Odin's hall, and half in Freyja's hall Sessrumnir- and the goddess got first pick.



## 11: FORSETI: insight, ORATE, shield

Forseti is the god of justice, peace and truth. Forseti was considered the wisest and most eloquent of gods of Asgard. In contrast to his fellow god Tyr, who presided over the bloody affairs of carnal law, Forseti presided over disputes resolved by mediation. He sat in his hall, dispensing justice to those who sought it, and was said to be able to always provide a solution that all parties considered fair. Like his father Balder, he was a gentle god and favored peace so all judged by him could live in safety as long as they upheld his sentence. Forseti was so respected that only the most solemn oaths were uttered in his name.

## 12: VIDAR: wrestle, might, sword

Vidar is called the silent god who wears a thick shoe, is almost equal in strength to Thor, and can always be counted on to help the Aesir in their struggles. During Ragnarök, when the wolf Fenrir devours Odin, Vidar will avenge him by stepping down with one foot on the lower jaw of the monster, grabbing his upper jaw in one hand and tearing his mouth apart, killing him. Vidar's "thick shoe" consists of all the leather waste pieces that people have cut from their own shoes at the toe and heel, collected by the god

throughout all time. Therefore, anyone who is concerned enough to give assistance to the gods must throw these pieces away.

Following Ragnarök and the rebirth of the world, Vidar along with his brother Váli will have survived both the deluge of the sea and the fiery conflagration unleashed by Surtr, completely unharmed, and shall thereafter dwell on the field of Idavoll, "where the city of Asgard had previously been".