THE NORSEMEN SAGA

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Introduction

The prime importance of the rude fragments of poetry preserved in early Icelandic literature will now be disputed by none, but there has been until recent times an extraordinary indifference to the wealth of religious tradition and mythical lore which they contain.

The long neglect of these precious records of our heathen ancestors is not the fault of the material in which all that survives of their religious beliefs is enshrined, for it may safely be asserted that the Edda is as rich in the essentials of national romance and race-imagination, rugged though it be, as the more graceful and idyllic mythology of the South. Neither is it due to anything weak in the conception of the deities themselves, for although they may not rise to great spiritual heights, foremost students of Icelandic literature agree that they stand out rude and massive as the Scandinavian mountains. They exhibit “a spirit of victory, superior to brute force, superior to mere matter, a spirit that fights and overcomes.”1 “Even were some part of the matter of their myths taken from others, yet the Norsemen have given their gods a noble, upright, great spirit, and placed them upon a high level that is all their own.”2 “In fact these old Norse songs have a truth in them, an inward perennial truth and greatness. It is a greatness not of mere body and gigantic bulk, but a rude greatness of soul.”3

The introduction of Christianity into the North brought with it the influence of the Classical races, and this eventually supplanted the native genius, so that the alien mythology and literature of Greece and Rome have formed an increasing part of the mental equipment of the northern peoples in proportion as the native literature and tradition have been neglected.

Undoubtedly Northern mythology has exercised a deep influence upon our customs, laws, and language, and there has been, therefore, a great unconscious inspiration flowing from these into English literature. The most distinctive traits of this mythology are a peculiar grim humour, to be found in the religion of no other race, and a dark thread of tragedy which runs throughout the whole woof, and these characteristics, touching both extremes, are writ large over English literature.

But of conscious influence, compared with the rich draught of Hellenic inspiration, there is little to be found, and if we turn to modern art the difference is even more apparent.

This indifference may be attributed to many causes, but it was due first to the fact that the religious beliefs of our pagan ancestors were not held with any real tenacity. Hence the success of the more or less considered policy of the early Christian missionaries to confuse the heathen beliefs, and merge them in the new faith, an interesting example of which is to be seen in the transference to the Christian festival of Easter of the attributes of the pagan goddess Eástre, from whom it took even the name. Northern mythology was in this way arrested ere it had

attained its full development, and the progress of Christianity eventually relegated it to the limbo of forgotten things. Its comprehensive and intelligent scheme, however, in strong contrast with the disconnected mythology of Greece and Rome, formed the basis of a more or less rational faith which prepared the Norseman to receive the teaching of Christianity, and so helped to bring about its own undoing.

The religious beliefs of the North are not mirrored with any exactitude in the Elder Edda. Indeed only a travesty of the faith of our ancestors has been preserved in Norse literature. The early poet loved allegory, and his imagination rioted among the conceptions of his fertile muse. “His eye was fixed on the mountains till the snowy peaks assumed human features and the giant of the rock or the ice descended with heavy tread; or he would gaze at the splendour of the spring, or of the summer fields, till Freya with the gleaming necklace stepped forth, or Sif with the flowing locks of gold.”4

We are told nothing as to sacrificial and religious rites, and all else is omitted which does not provide material for artistic treatment. The so-called Northern Mythology, therefore, may be regarded as a precious relic of the beginning of Northern poetry, rather than as a representation of the religious beliefs of the Scandinavians, and these literary fragments bear many signs of the transitional stage wherein the confusion of the old and new faiths is easily apparent.

But notwithstanding the limitations imposed by long neglect it is possible to reconstruct in part a plan of the

ancient Norse beliefs, and the general reader will derive much profit from Carlyle's illuminating study in "Heroes and Hero-worship." "A bewildering, inextricable jungle of delusions, confusions, falsehoods and absurdities, covering the whole field of Life!" he calls them, with all good reason. But he goes on to show, with equal truth, that at the soul of this crude worship of distorted nature was a spiritual force seeking expression. What we probe without reverence they viewed with awe, and not understanding it, straightway deified it, as all children have been apt to do in all stages of the world's history. Truly they were hero-worshippers after Carlyle's own heart, and scepticism had no place in their simple philosophy.

It was the infancy of thought gazing upon a universe filled with divinity, and believing heartily with all sincerity. A large-hearted people reaching out in the dark towards ideals which were better than they knew. Ragnarok was to undo their gods because they had stumbled from their higher standards.

We have to thank a curious phenomenon for the preservation of so much of the old lore as we still possess. While foreign influences were corrupting the Norse language, it remained practically unaltered in Iceland, which had been colonised from the mainland by the Norsemen who had fled thither to escape the oppression of Harold Fairhair after his crushing victory of Hafrsfirth. These people brought with them the poetic genius which had already manifested itself, and it took fresh root in that barren soil. Many of the old Norse poets were natives of Iceland, and in the early part of the Christian era, a supreme service was rendered to Norse literature by the Christian priest, Sæmund, who industriously brought

together a large amount of pagan poetry in a collection known as the Elder Edda, which is the chief foundation of our present knowledge of the religion of our Norse ancestors. Icelandic literature remained a sealed book, however, until the end of the eighteenth century, and very slowly since that time it has been winning its way in the teeth of indifference, until there are now signs that it will eventually come into its own. “To know the old Faith,” says Carlyle, “brings us into closer and clearer relation with the Past—with our own possessions in the Past. For the whole Past is the possession of the Present; the Past had always something true, and is a precious possession.”

The weighty words of William Morris regarding the Volsunga Saga may also be fitly quoted as an introduction to the whole of this collection of “Myths of the Norsemen”: “This is the great story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks—to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been—a story too—then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.”

1 “Northern Mythology,” Kauffmann.
2 Halliday Sparling.
3 Carlyle, “Heroes and Hero Worship.”
4 “Northern Mythology,” Kauffmann.

Chapter I: The Beginning

Myths of Creation

Although the Aryan inhabitants of Northern Europe are supposed by some authorities to have come originally from the plateau of Iran, in the heart of Asia, the climate and scenery of the countries where they finally settled had great influence in shaping their early religious beliefs, as well as in ordering their mode of living.

The grand and rugged landscapes of Northern Europe, the midnight sun, the flashing rays of the aurora borealis, the ocean continually lashing itself into fury against the great cliffs and icebergs of the Arctic Circle, could not but impress the people as vividly as the almost miraculous vegetation, the perpetual light, and the blue seas and skies of their brief summer season. It is no great wonder, therefore, that the Icelanders, for instance, to whom we owe the most perfect records of this belief, fancied in looking about them that the world was originally created from a strange mixture of fire and ice.

Northern mythology is grand and tragical. Its principal theme is the perpetual struggle of the beneficent forces of Nature against the injurious, and hence it is not graceful

and idyllic in character, like the religion of the sunny South, where the people could bask in perpetual sunshine, and the fruits of the earth grew ready to their hand.

It was very natural that the dangers incurred in hunting and fishing under these inclement skies, and the suffering entailed by the long cold winters when the sun never shines, made our ancestors contemplate cold and ice as malevolent spirits; and it was with equal reason that they invoked with special fervour the beneficent influences of heat and light.

When questioned concerning the creation of the world, the Northern scalds, or poets, whose songs are preserved in the Eddas and Sagas, declared that in the beginning, when there was as yet no earth, nor sea, nor air, when darkness rested over all, there existed a powerful being called Allfather, whom they dimly conceived as uncreated as well as unseen, and that whatever he willed came to pass.

In the centre of space there was, in the morning of time, a great abyss called Ginnunga-gap, the cleft of clefts, the yawning gulf, whose depths no eye could fathom, as it was enveloped in perpetual twilight. North of this abode was a space or world known as Nifl-heim, the home of mist and darkness, in the centre of which bubbled the exhaustless spring Hvergelmir, the seething cauldron, whose waters supplied twelve great streams known as the Elivagar. As the water of these streams flowed swiftly away from its source and encountered the cold blasts from the yawning gulf, it soon hardened into huge blocks of ice, which rolled downward into the immeasurable depths of the great abyss with a continual roar like thunder.

South of this dark chasm, and directly opposite Nifl-heim, the realm of mist, was another world called Muspells-heim, the home of elemental fire, where all was warmth and brightness, and whose frontiers were continually guarded by Surtr, the flame giant. This giant fiercely brandished his flashing sword, and continually sent forth great showers of sparks, which fell with a hissing sound upon the ice-blocks in the bottom of the abyss, and partly melted them by their heat.

“Great Surtur, with his burning sword,
Southward at Muspel’s gate kept ward,
And flashes of celestial flame,
Life-giving, from the fire-world came.”
Valhalla (J. C. Jones).

Ymir and Audhumla

As the steam rose in clouds it again encountered the prevailing cold, and was changed into rime or hoarfrost, which, layer by layer, filled up the great central space. Thus by the continual action of cold and heat, and also probably by the will of the uncreated and unseen, a gigantic creature called Ymir or Orgelmir (seething clay), the personification of the frozen ocean, came to life amid the ice-blocks in the abyss, and as he was born of rime he was called a Hrim-thurs, or ice-giant.

“In early times,
When Ymir lived,

Was sand, nor sea,
Nor cooling wave;
No earth was found,
Nor heaven above;
One chaos all,
And nowhere grass.”
Sæmund’s Edda (Henderson’s tr.).

Groping about in the gloom in search of something to eat, Ymir perceived a gigantic cow called Audhumla (the nourisher), which had been created by the same agency as himself, and out of the same materials. Hastening towards her, Ymir noticed with pleasure that from her udder flowed four great streams of milk, which would supply ample nourishment.

All his wants were thus satisfied; but the cow, looking about her for food in her turn, began to lick the salt off a neighbouring ice-block with her rough tongue. This she continued to do until first the hair of a god appeared and then the whole head emerged from its icy envelope, until by-and-by Buri (the producer) stepped forth entirely free.

While the cow had been thus engaged, Ymir, the [4]giant, had fallen asleep, and as he slept a son and daughter were born from the perspiration under his armpit, and his feet produced the six-headed giant Thrudgelmir, who, shortly after his birth, brought forth in his turn the giant Bergelmir, from whom all the evil frost giants are descended.

“Under the armpit grew,

’Tis said of Hrim-thurs,
A girl and boy together;
Foot with foot begat,
Of that wise Jötun,
A six-headed son.”
Sæmund’s Edda (Thorpe’s tr.).

Odin, Vili, and Ve

When these giants became aware of the existence of the god Buri, and of his son Börr (born), whom he had immediately produced, they began waging war against them, for as the gods and giants represented the opposite forces of good and evil, there was no hope of their living together in peace. The struggle continued evidently for ages, neither party gaining a decided advantage, until Börr married the giantess Bestla, daughter of Bolthorn (the thorn of evil), who bore him three powerful sons, Odin (spirit), Vili (will), and Ve (holy). These three sons immediately joined their father in his struggle against the hostile frost-giants, and finally succeeded in slaying their deadliest foe, the great Ymir. As he sank down lifeless the blood gushed from his wounds in such floods that it produced a great deluge, in which all his race perished, with the exception of Bergelmir, who escaped in a boat and went with his wife to the confines of the world.

“And all the race of Ymir thou didst drown,
Save one, Bergelmer: he on shipboard fled
Thy deluge, and from him the giants sprang.”
Balder Dead (Matthew Arnold).

Here he took up his abode, calling the place Jötunheim (the home of the giants), and here he begat a new race of frost-giants, who inherited his dislikes, continued the feud, and were always ready to sally forth from their desolate country and raid the territory of the gods.

The gods, in Northern mythology called Æsir (pillars and supporters of the world), having thus triumphed over their foes, and being no longer engaged in perpetual warfare, now began to look about them, with intent to improve the desolate aspect of things and fashion a habitable world. After due consideration Börr's sons rolled Ymir's great corpse into the yawning abyss, and began to create the world out of its various component parts.

The Creation of the Earth

Out of the flesh they fashioned Midgard (middle garden), as the earth was called. This was placed in the exact centre of the vast space, and hedged all round with Ymir's eyebrows for bulwarks or ramparts. The solid portion of Midgard was surrounded by the giant's blood or sweat, which formed the ocean, while his bones made the hills, his flat teeth the cliffs, and his curly hair the trees and all vegetation.

Well pleased with the result of their first efforts at creation, the gods now took the giant's unwieldy skull and poised it skilfully as the vaulted heavens above earth and sea; then scattering his brains throughout the expanse beneath they fashioned from them the fleecy clouds.

“Of Ymir’s flesh
Was earth created,
Of his blood the sea,
Of his bones the hills,
Of his hair trees and plants,
Of his skull the heavens,
And of his brows
The gentle powers
Formed Midgard for the sons of men;
But of his brain
The heavy clouds are
All created.”
Norse Mythology (R. B. Anderson).

To support the heavenly vault, the gods stationed the strong dwarfs, Nordri, Sudri, Austri, Westri, at its four corners, bidding them sustain it upon their shoulders, and from them the four points of the compass received their present names of North, South, East, and West. To give light to the world thus created, the gods studded the heavenly vault with sparks secured from Muspells-heim, points of light which shone steadily through the gloom like brilliant stars. The most vivid of these sparks, however, were reserved for the manufacture of the sun and moon, which were placed in beautiful golden chariots.

“And from the flaming world, where Muspel reigns,
Thou sent’st and fetched’st fire, and madest lights:
Sun, moon, and stars, which thou hast hung in heaven,
Dividing clear the paths of night and day.”
Balder Dead (Matthew Arnold).

When all these preparations had been finished, and the

steeds Arvakr (the early waker) and Alsvin (the rapid goer) were harnessed to the sun-chariot, the gods, fearing lest the animals should suffer from their proximity to the ardent sphere, placed under their withers great skins filled with air or with some refrigerant substance. They also fashioned the shield Svalin (the cooler), and placed it in front of the car to shelter them from the sun's direct rays, which would else have [7]burned them and the earth to a cinder. The moon-car was, similarly, provided with a fleet steed called Alsvider (the all-swift); but no shield was required to protect him from the mild rays of the moon.

Mani and Sol

The chariots were ready, the steeds harnessed and impatient to begin what was to be their daily round, but who should guide them along the right road? The gods looked about them, and their attention was attracted to the two beautiful offspring of the giant Mundilfari. He was very proud of his children, and had named them after the newly created orbs, Mani (the moon) and Sol (the sun). Sol, the Sun-maid, was the spouse of Glaur (glow), who was probably one of Surtr's sons.

The names proved to be happily bestowed, as the brother and sister were given the direction of the steeds of their bright namesakes. After receiving due counsel from the gods, they were transferred to the sky, and day by day they fulfilled their appointed duties and guided their steeds along the heavenly paths.

"Know that Mundilfær is hight

Father to the moon and sun;
Age on age shall roll away,
While they mark the months and days.”
Hávamál (W. Taylor’s tr.).

The gods next summoned Nott (night), a daughter of Norvi, one of the giants, and entrusted to her care a dark chariot, drawn by a sable steed, Hrim-faxi (frost mane), from whose waving mane the dew and hoarfrost dropped down upon the earth.

“Hrim-faxi is the sable steed,
From the east who brings the night,
Fraught with the showering joys of love:
As he champs the foamy bit,
Drops of dew are scattered round
To adorn the vales of earth.”
Vafthrudni’s-mal (W. Taylor’s tr.).

The goddess of night had thrice been married, and by her first husband, Naglfari, she had had a son named Aud; by her second, Annar, a daughter Jörd (earth); and by her third, the god Dellinger (dawn), another son, of radiant beauty, was now born to her, and he was given the name of Dag (day).

As soon as the gods became aware of this beautiful being’s existence they provided a chariot for him also, drawn by the resplendent white steed Skin-faxi (shining mane), from whose mane bright beams of light shone forth in every direction, illuminating all the world, and bringing light and gladness to all.

“Forth from the east, up the ascent of heaven,
Day drove his courser with the shining mane.”
Balder Dead (Matthew Arnold).

The Wolves Sköll and Hati

But as evil always treads close upon the footsteps of good, hoping to destroy it, the ancient inhabitants of the Northern regions imagined that both Sun and Moon were incessantly pursued by the fierce wolves Sköll (repulsion) and Hati (hatred), whose sole aim was to overtake and swallow the brilliant objects before them, so that the world might again be enveloped in its primeval darkness.

“Sköll the wolf is named
That the fair-faced goddess
To the ocean chases;
Another Hati hight
He is Hrodvitnir’s son;
He the bright maid of heaven shall precede.”
Sæmuna’s Edda (Thorpe’s tr.).

At times, they said, the wolves overtook and tried to swallow their prey, thus producing an eclipse of the radiant orbs. Then the terrified people raised such a deafening clamour that the wolves, frightened by the noise, hastily dropped them. Thus rescued, Sun and Moon resumed their course, fleeing more rapidly than before, the hungry monsters rushing along in their wake, lusting for the time when their efforts would prevail and the end of the world

would come. For the Northern nations believed that as their gods had sprung from an alliance between the divine element (Börr) and the mortal (Bestla), they were finite, and doomed to perish with the world they had made.

“But even in this early morn
Faintly foreshadowed was the dawn
Of that fierce struggle, deadly shock,
Which yet should end in Ragnarok;
When Good and Evil, Death and Life,
Beginning now, end then their strife.”
Valhalla (J. C. Jones).

Mani was accompanied also by Hiuki, the waxing, and Bil, the waning, moon, two children whom he had snatched from earth, where a cruel father forced them to carry water all night. Our ancestors fancied they saw these children, the original “Jack and Jill,” with their pail, darkly outlined upon the moon.

The gods not only appointed Sun, Moon, Day, and Night to mark the procession of the year, but also called Evening, Midnight, Morning, Forenoon, Noon, and Afternoon to share their duties, making Summer and Winter the rulers of the seasons. Summer, a direct descendant of Svasud (the mild and lovely), inherited his sire’s gentle disposition, and was loved by all except Winter, his deadly enemy, the son of Vindsual, himself a son of the disagreeable god Vasud, the personification of the icy wind.

“Vindsual is the name of him
Who begat the winter’s god;

Summer from Suasuthur sprang:
Both shall walk the way of years,
Till the twilight of the gods.”
Vafthrudni’s-mal (W. Taylor’s tr.).

The cold winds continually swept down from the north, chilling all the earth, and the Northmen imagined that these were set in motion by the great giant Hræ-svelgr (the corpse-swallower), who, clad in eagle plumes, sat at the extreme northern verge of the heavens, and that when he raised his arms or wings the cold blasts darted forth and swept ruthlessly over the face of the earth, blighting all things with their icy breath.

“Hræ-svelger is the name of him
Who sits beyond the end of heaven,
And winnows wide his eagle-wings,
Whence the sweeping blasts have birth.”
Vafthrudni’s-mal (W. Taylor’s tr.).

Dwarfs and Elves

While the gods were occupied in creating the earth and providing for its illumination, a whole host of maggot-like creatures had been breeding in Ymir’s flesh. These uncouth beings now attracted divine attention. Summoning them into their presence, the gods first gave them forms and endowed them with superhuman intelligence, and then divided them into two large classes. Those which were dark, treacherous, and cunning by nature were banished to Svart-alfa-heim, the home of the black dwarfs, situated underground, whence they were never allowed to come

forth during the day, under penalty of being turned into stone. They were called Dwarfs, Trolls, Gnomes, or Kobolds, and spent all their time and energy in exploring the secret recesses of the earth. They collected gold, silver, and precious stones, which they stowed away in secret crevices, whence they could withdraw them at will. The remainder of these small creatures, including all that were fair, good, and useful, the gods called Fairies and Elves, and they sent them to dwell in the airy realm of Alf-heim (home of the light-elves), situated between heaven and earth, whence they could flit downward whenever they pleased, to attend to the plants and flowers, sport with the birds and butterflies, or dance in the silvery moonlight on the green.

Odin, who had been the leading spirit in all these undertakings, now bade the gods, his descendants, follow him to the broad plain called Idawold, far above the earth, on the other side of the great stream Ifing, whose waters never froze.

“Ifing’s deep and murky wave
Parts the ancient sons of earth
From the dwelling of the Goths:
Open flows the mighty flood,
Nor shall ice arrest its course
While the wheel of Ages rolls.”
Vafthrudni’s-mal (W. Taylor’s tr.).

In the centre of the sacred space, which from the beginning of the world had been reserved for their own abode and called Asgard (home of the gods), the twelve Æsir (gods) and twenty-four Asynjur (goddesses) all assembled at the

bidding of Odin. Then was held a great council, at which it was decreed that no blood should be shed within the limits of their realm, or peace-stead, but that harmony should reign there for ever. As a further result of the conference the gods set up a forge where they fashioned all their weapons and the tools required to build the magnificent palaces of precious metals, in which they lived for many long years in a state of such perfect happiness that this period has been called the Golden Age.

The Creation of Man

Although the gods had from the beginning designed Midgard, or Mana-heim, as the abode of man, there were at first no human beings to inhabit it. One day Odin, Vili, and Ve, according to some authorities, or Odin, Hoenir (the bright one), and Lodur, or Loki (fire), started out together and walked along the seashore, where they found either two trees, the ash, Ask, and the elm, Embla, or two blocks of wood, hewn into rude semblances of the human form. The gods gazed at first upon the inanimate wood in silent wonder; then, perceiving the use it could be put to, Odin gave these logs souls, Hoenir bestowed motion and senses, and Lodur contributed blood and blooming complexions.

Thus endowed with speech and thought, and with power to love and to hope and to work, and with life and death, the newly created man and woman were left to rule Midgard at will. They gradually peopled it with their descendants, while the gods, remembering they had called them into life, took a special interest in all they did, watched over them, and often vouchsafed their aid and protection.

The Tree Yggdrasil

Allfather next created a huge ash called Yggdrasil, the tree of the universe, of time, or of life, which filled all the world, taking root not only in the remotest depths of Nifl-heim, where bubbled the spring Hvergelmir, but also in Midgard, near Mimir's well (the ocean), and in Asgard, near the Urdar fountain.

From its three great roots the tree attained such a marvellous height that its topmost bough, called Lerad (the peace-giver), overshadowed Odin's hall, while the other wide-spreading branches towered over the other worlds. An eagle was perched on the bough Lerad, and between his eyes sat the falcon Vedfolnir, sending his piercing glances down into heaven, earth, and Nifl-heim, and reporting all that he saw.

As the tree Yggdrasil was ever green, its leaves never withering, it served as pasture-ground not only for Odin's goat Heidrun, which supplied the heavenly mead, the drink of the gods, but also for the stags Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr, and Durathor, from whose horns honey-dew dropped down upon the earth and furnished the water for all the rivers in the world.

In the seething cauldron Hvergelmir, close by the great tree, a horrible dragon, called Nidhug, continually gnawed the roots, and was helped in his work of destruction by countless worms, whose aim it was to kill the tree, knowing that its death would be the signal for the downfall of the

gods.

“Through all our life a tempter prowls malignant,
The cruel Nidhug from the world below.
He hates that asa-light whose rays benignant
On th’ hero’s brow and glitt’ring sword bright glow.”
Viking Tales of the North (R. B. Anderson).

Scampering continually up and down the branches and trunk of the tree, the squirrel Ratatosk (branch-borer), the typical busybody and tale-bearer, passed its time repeating to the dragon below the remarks of the eagle above, and vice versa, in the hope of stirring up strife between them.

The Bridge Bifröst

It was, of course, essential that the tree Yggdrasil should be maintained in a perfectly healthy condition, and this duty was performed by the Norns, or Fates, who daily sprinkled it with the holy waters from the Urdar fountain. This water, as it trickled down to earth through branches and leaves, supplied the bees with honey.

From either edge of Nifl-heim, arching high above Midgard, rose the sacred bridge, Bifröst (Asabru, the rainbow), built of fire, water, and air, whose quivering and changing hues it retained, and over which the gods travelled to and fro to the earth or to the Urdar well, at the foot of the ash Yggdrasil, where they daily assembled in council.

“The gods arose
And took their horses, and set forth to ride
O’er the bridge Bifrost, where is Heimdall’s watch,
To the ash Igdrasil, and Ida’s plain.
Thor came on foot, the rest on horseback rode.”
Balder Dead (Matthew Arnold).

Of all the gods Thor only, the god of thunder, never passed over the bridge, for fear lest his heavy tread or the heat of his lightnings would destroy it. The god Heimdall kept watch and ward there night and day. He was armed with a trenchant sword, and carried a trumpet called Giallar-horn, upon which he generally blew a soft note to announce the coming or going of the gods, but upon which a terrible blast would be sounded when Ragnarok should come, and the frost-giants and Surtr combined to destroy the world.

“Surt from the south comes
With flickering flame;
Shines from his sword
The Val-god’s sun.
The stony hills are dashed together,
The giantesses totter;
Men tread the path of Hel,
And heaven is cloven.”
Sæmund’s Edda (Thorpe’s tr.).

The Vanas

Now although the original inhabitants of heaven were the Æsir, they were not the sole divinities of the Northern races, who also recognised the power of the sea- and wind-

gods, the Vanas, dwelling in Vana-heim and ruling their realms as they pleased. In early times, before the golden palaces in Asgard were built, a dispute arose between the Æsir and Vanas, and they resorted to arms, using rocks, mountains, and icebergs as missiles in the fray. But discovering ere long that in unity alone lay strength, they composed their differences and made peace, and to ratify the treaty they exchanged hostages.

It was thus that the Van, Niörd, came to dwell in Asgard with his two children, Frey and Freya, while the Asa, Hoenir, Odin’s own brother, took up his abode in Vana-heim.

Chapter II: Odin

The Father of Gods and Men

Odin, Wuotan, or Woden was the highest and holiest god of the Northern races. He was the all-pervading spirit of the universe, the personification of the air, the god of universal wisdom and victory, and the leader and protector of princes and heroes. As all the gods were supposed to be descended from him, he was surnamed Allfather, and as eldest and chief among them he occupied the highest seat in Asgard. Known by the name of Hlidskialf, this chair was not only an exalted throne, but also a mighty watch-tower, from whence he could overlook the whole world and see at a glance all that was happening among gods, giants, elves, dwarfs, and men.

“From the hall of Heaven he rode away
To Lidskialf, and sate upon his throne,
The mount, from whence his eye surveys the world.
And far from Heaven he turned his shining orbs
To look on Midgard, and the earth, and men.”
Balder Dead (Matthew Arnold).

Odin’s Personal Appearance

None but Odin and his wife and queen Frigga were privileged to use this seat, and when they occupied it they generally gazed towards the south and west, the goal of all the hopes and excursions of the Northern nations. Odin was generally represented as a tall, vigorous man, about fifty years of age, either with dark curling hair or with a long grey beard and bald head. He was clad in a suit of grey, with a blue hood, and his muscular body was enveloped in a wide blue mantle flecked with grey—an emblem of the sky with its fleecy clouds. In his hand Odin generally carried the infallible [17]spear Gungnir, which was so sacred that an oath sworn upon its point could never be broken, and on his finger or arm he wore the marvellous ring, Draupnir, the emblem of fruitfulness, precious beyond compare. When seated upon his throne or armed for the fray, to mingle in which he would often descend to earth, Odin wore his eagle helmet; but when he wandered peacefully about the earth in human guise, to see what men were doing, he generally donned a broad-brimmed hat, drawn low over his forehead to conceal the fact that he possessed but one eye.

Two ravens, Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory), perched upon his shoulders as he sat upon his throne, and these he sent out into the wide world every morning, anxiously watching for their return at nightfall, when they whispered into his ears news of all they had seen and heard. Thus he was kept well informed about everything that was happening on earth.

“Hugin and Munin

Fly each day
Over the spacious earth.
I fear for Hugin
That he come not back,
Yet more anxious am I for Munin.”
Norse Mythology (R. B. Anderson).

At his feet crouched two wolves or hunting hounds, Geri and Freki, animals which were therefore considered sacred to him, and of good omen if met by the way. Odin always fed these wolves with his own hands from meat set before him. He required no food at all for himself, and seldom tasted anything except the sacred mead.

“Geri and Freki
The war-wont sates,
The triumphant sire of hosts;
But on wine only
The famed in arms
Odin, ever lives.”
Lay of Grimnir (Thorpe’s tr.).

When seated in state upon his throne, Odin rested his feet upon a footstool of gold, the work of the gods, all of whose furniture and utensils were fashioned either of that precious metal or of silver.

Besides the magnificent hall Glads-heim, where stood the twelve seats occupied by the gods when they met in council, and Valaskialf, where his throne, Hlidskialf, was placed, Odin had a third palace in Asgard, situated in the

midst of the marvellous grove Glasir, whose shimmering leaves were of red gold.

Valhalla

This palace, called Valhalla (the hall of the chosen slain), had five hundred and forty doors, wide enough to allow the passage of eight hundred warriors abreast, and above the principal gate were a boar's head and an eagle whose piercing glance penetrated to the far corners of the world. The walls of this marvellous building were fashioned of glittering spears, so highly polished that they illuminated the hall. The roof was of golden shields, and the benches were decorated with fine armour, the god's gifts to his guests. Here long tables afforded ample accommodation for the Einheriar, warriors fallen in battle, who were specially favoured by Odin.

"Easily to be known is,
By those who to Odin come,
The mansion by its aspect.
Its roof with spears is laid,
Its hall with shields is decked,
With corselets are its benches strewed."
Lay of Grimnir (Thorpe's tr.).

The ancient Northern nations, who deemed warfare the most honourable of occupations, and considered courage the greatest virtue, worshipped Odin principally as god of battle and victory. They believed that whenever a fight was impending he sent out his special attendants, the shield-, battle-, or wish-maidens, called Valkyrs (choosers of the