



The World of Norse Myth

There are a great many names in this book that may be unfamiliar to the casual reader. In order to avoid confusion, the following pages give a brief summary of the major Norse gods and mythological realms.

The Aesir

The Aesir were one of two tribes of Norse gods. The other, the Vanir, were more obscure and are rarely mentioned in the myths.

Odin was the leader of the Aesir. According to some myths he was the father of Thor and many of the other gods, but this may be a later addition intended to bring Norse mythology into line with the classical Greek and Roman model, where Zeus/Jupiter was the father of the gods as well as their chief. Odin was unpredictable and a cunning magician. While hanging on the world-tree Yggdrasil in what sounds like a shamanic ordeal, he sacrificed an eye in exchange for mystical knowledge. In Norse myths, he often travels among mortals as an old one-eyed man in a broad-brimmed hat, bringing good luck and bad.

Frigga was Odin's wife and the queen of Asgard. She is said to have had the power of prophecy, but little else is said of her.

Loki is a malicious trickster who constantly tries to attack and undermine the Aesir. He is also the father of the goddess Hel, the Midgard Serpent Jormungand, and the great wolf Fenrir, and the mother (through shape-changing) of Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir.

Balder, the most beautiful of the Norse gods, is the son of Odin and Frigga. He was killed through Loki's malevolence.

Frey is a Vanir who lives among the Aesir. He and his sister Freyja came to Asgard (along with the little-known Njord, according to some sources) as hostages to seal the peace that ended the Aesir-Vanir war long ago. Both Frey and Freyja seem to be fertility deities.

Tyr was a god of victory in battle, and may also have been the patron deity of the law. When the Aesir determined to bind Fenrir, Tyr placed his hand in the wolf's mouth as a surety that they meant no harm. When Fenrir found himself unable to break the Aesir's bonds, he bit off Tyr's hand.

Sif was Thor's wife. Apart from the fact that her golden hair was much admired, little is known of her.

Heimdall was the watchman of Asgard and would sound the horn Gjallarhorn to raise the alarm when the giants crossed the rainbow bridge Bifrost at the start of Ragnarok, the war at the end of the world.

Various lesser Aesir are mentioned in the mythological sources, but these are the main deities who appear in the tales of Thor's exploits.

(Opposite) An 18th-century Icelandic image of Thor fishing for the Midgard Serpent. (Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark / The Bridgeman Art Library)

