The Viking Spirit

An Introduction to Norse Mythology and Religion

Daniel McCoy

The Viking Spirit

An Introduction to Norse Mythology and Religion

DANIEL MCCOY

ISBN: 1533393036

ISBN-13: 978-1533393036

Table of Contents

Part One: Norse Religion

Chapter 1: Introduction

THE VIKING WORLD

The longship sways on the windy sea like a seer in a trance. After days of hard rowing through rain and roiling waves, the crew is exhausted. Their rough, gray-brown woolen clothes are heavy with water, and even though the rain has finally given way to a merely cloudy morning, the August air is cool enough that the drenched men shiver as they take turns rowing and amusing themselves with dice games.

They had set sail from the western coast of Scandinavia several days ago, bound for the eastern coast of England, a land about whose riches they had heard many marvelous tales from Vikings under the leadership of neighboring kings and chieftains. None of the men in the king's fleet of five impressive ships have ever yet set foot on that great island. But they are expert navigators, and know the signs to watch in the sky and water to guide them west.

Sverrir removes a soggy barley roll from his sack and takes a bite. The bread, having been threshed on the ground, is full of bits of sand and dirt. Although he's only in his late teens, eating rough bread like this for his entire life has ground his teeth down considerably. He's already lost a few of them. This roll, however, has some of the inner bark of a pine tree baked into it to provide much-needed vitamins to ward off scurvy. Though the meager roll is not enough to fill his belly, he's grateful for the edge being taken off his hunger, as well as the nourishment.

In his childhood, Sverrir had grown up the son of a fairly well-off farmer. Although he had been made to join in the difficult, dangerous, and seemingly neverending farmwork when he was still a young boy, and had lived through two separate occasions of bitter famine that left him shorter than he would otherwise have been, he has often found himself missing the relative certainty and security of those days. He had always wanted to inherit his father's farm, but when his father died from disease when Sverrir was seventeen, he had known that as the fourth and youngest son, he stood little chance of inheriting anything in his father's estate. And he had been right. So, out of hardship as much as ambition, he had gone and joined the king's band of warriors and raiders.

Now, at last, he is on his first raid. Still just eighteen, he is terrified, but eager for the honor that these pursuits will surely bring him back at home. And his leader, King Harald, has so far shown himself to be a noble, generous, and fiercely clever man. Sverrir is proud to serve him.

Sverrir looks up and sees his king standing at the front of the ship, observing the heavens and giving instructions to the helmsman. This, thinks Sverrir, is how Odin must look when he leads the gods into battle against the giants. Sverrir himself is a man of Thor, and he had sacrificed a goat to his patron god in return for good fortune on this raid on the day before he left home.

A gull cries out as it flies overhead. The crewmembers all cease their tasks for a moment and take notice. It means that they're getting close to land. And, soon enough, through the clearing mist, the first faint outlines of the white and green coast of England come into view.

The clanking and tinkling of metal can be heard from every corner of the ship as the warriors get their weapons in order. The few of them who own some pieces of armor put them on. Sverrir readies his axe. He and Hauk, his best friend from childhood who has also become one of the king's warriors, exchange warm words of encouragement. The king delivers a rousing speech, as do the chieftains for their men in the accompanying vessels.

The ships land and their crews disembark. No one else is in sight, but if their informants have told them correctly, there should be a wealthy trading city just over the dune-like hills that form the perimeter of the sandy beach.

When the king's force rounds the crest of the hills, they see a large town with a magnificent, ornate building with many spires in its center. Still no one is in sight. But as they make their way through the farms at the city's edge and toward the wall that encloses the city proper, they see bread half-kneaded sitting on tables and fires half-smoldering in hearths. The inhabitants of these farms have left very recently – and very quickly.

By the time the force reaches the city gates, many of the warriors have worked themselves up into an ecstatic frenzy and are howling, baying, and roaring like wolves and bears. Everyone is shouting and banging their weapons against their thick wooden shields. The first flurry of arrows rains down upon them from slits in the stone wall above the grand doors. The men raise their shields to deflect them. A few anguished screams are heard, but the band presses forward. In a surprisingly short time, they hack their way through the doors and into the city. But again, they see no one. Even the archers have seemingly fled. The men go around ransacking everything in their path, picking up anything of value they encounter, of which they can find strangely little.

At last, they reach the grandiose building at the center of the city. Sverrir whispers to Hauk that the building looks like one of the great temples he's been told exist in this land, where ceremonies so bizarre as to be barely believable take place to honor a god who is said to reign alone and to hate all of the other gods and goddesses. If the legends are true, he says, the people who worship in such a place even eat the flesh and blood of one of their heroes. The ever-skeptical Hauk snorts and dismisses such reports as nothing more than tall tales.

At first, they hear no sounds coming from within the building. But as they get closer, they can make out the muffled sounds of a man speaking. There is authority and leadership in his tone and cadence, but his voice cracks and scrambles, as if out of mortal fear. The Vikings chop through the doors and smash the high, intricately-colored windows.

As the first warriors pour in, desperate shrieks break out from the crowd of men, women, and children huddled inside. The interior of the building is more lavish by far than any Sverrir has ever seen. This effect is heightened by the fact that the townspeople have evidently brought all of the valuables they could into this place with them, although many of the most expensive items Sverrir can see around him are part of the fixtures of the building itself.

The townspeople perform a strange gesture that involves touching one of their hands to four different parts of their torso and head as the Vikings begin to hew down anyone – man, woman, or child – who stands between them and their plunder. Some seem to murder for no other reason than sport, or perhaps unquenchable, ecstatic rage.

Sverrir approaches a man wearing a long, richly decorated robe, attempting to flee with an axe-sized cross made of gold with the body of a scrawny man carved onto one side. Sverrir grabs him by the shoulder, stares down at him with all the ferocity he can muster, and says, "Give me the gold you're holding and I'll spare your life." Then man hesitates, weeping, but when Sverrir raises his axe, he obliges. Sverrir lets him go, and the man inhales to heave a sigh of both relief and despair before another one of the Viking warriors, a veteran of many raids famed for his reckless daring, rushes up screaming and slashes the man's head halfway off his neck, so that it dangles to one side as the man's body falls to the ground. The young fighter feels his stomach contents lurching up toward his mouth, but he summons all his strength to force them back down. The senseless suffering and gore all around him has turned out to bear little resemblance to the shining vision of battle that had been presented to him in songs and speeches back at home. But, he reminds himself, he is still young and

inexperienced; perhaps he's missing something. And after all, are not he and his fellow raiders winning the wealth they set out to win – and, afterwards, a celebrated name in their hometown? Doesn't that make the rest of this really quite grim and sordid expedition worthwhile?

Above the clamor of carnage, a war horn is heard, snapping Sverrir out of his brief reverie. Some of the people rush to the broken windows on the side from which the blast had come. The townspeople turn away with a look of hope on their faces, but the Vikings turn away with a look of great worry. It's a formidable English army, many times larger than the Viking force, arriving with reinforcements for the city.

King Harald shouts an order to return to the boats at once with the spoils. The men run as fast as they can manage with their loot, but shortly before reaching the dunes they are overtaken. A terrible battle erupts. Many die on both sides. The English army is led by the regional king, who ably commands his well-trained ranks. Though the Vikings do eventually make it back to the ships and set sail for home with much of their plunder in tow, they suffer heavy losses. Most distressingly for Sverrir, Hauk falls after having fought valiantly.

After many more days at sea, nursing wounds great and small, eating more stale bread, and dealing with more inclement weather, King Harald's men at last spy the looming mountains and beckoning fjords of their homeland. Upon their arrival in their hometown, the raiding party receives a triumphant welcome. Sverrir is greeted warmly by his brothers and by Thordis, a charming girl of about his age whom he had been courting for a while before embarking on the raid. They've talked about marriage, but Sverrir wants to amass enough wealth by plundering to buy a farm before he settles down with her or anyone else. He's heard that she excels at spinning, weaving, sewing, cooking, milking, making dairy products, and everything else on the seemingly endless list of tasks a capable wife is expected to perform, and to perform well. His feelings for her run deep, but he knows that love alone doesn't keep a farm going.

The following day, the king holds a splendid feast in his hall for his warriors. The long, high, timber building has no windows. Firelight provides the only illumination, and in it, the king, dressed in his finest clothes and armor, much of which contains gold and silver, positively glows, further setting him apart. The band of warriors is seated according to rank and accomplishment around two long, slender tables that run perpendicular to where King Harald sits at the head of the gathering. The queen brings out a large, ornate pitcher of mead and serves the warriors ceremoniously, beginning with the king and going on down the rows. Sverrir, being one of

the newest recruits, is seated toward the end of the tables, and is one of the last to be served.

When everyone's horn is filled with drink, rounds of toasts and oaths commence. Then, at last, the women bring out the food. The centerpiece of the meal is a bull that had earlier been sacrificed to give thanks for the (mostly) successful raid. As the men become more and more inebriated, and as their bellies get fuller and fuller from the sumptuous treats placed before them, the mood becomes more and more jovial, and their camaraderie is strengthened.

When the meal is finished, one of King Harald's many poets takes out a small harp and announces that he's written a new piece in honor of his patron. With his fingers plucking a suitable accompaniment, he sings a song whose wordcraft is so intricate and learned that the simple warriors – who, besides, are now quite drunk – can't make sense of parts of it, try as they might. What Sverrir can comprehend is that the king is said to be a descendent of Odin, that he has fought more battles and vanquished more foes than any other human king, and that his generosity is as unparalleled as his warlike prowess. The recent raid is presented as an unmitigated, glorious victory. Deep down, Sverrir finds himself questioning whether or not it had indeed happened as the poet now says it had. Hauk is dead, as are several of the king's other fighters, and besides, the poet hadn't even been there to witness it. What did he know? Nevertheless, Sverrir finds himself swept up in the rousing, artful moment. This reaction seems universal among the warriors, and they all agree afterward that, although some of the poem had gone over their heads, it must have been an exquisite piece.

Next, King Harald dispenses the spoils of the raid. As if in direct fulfillment of the poet's praises, the king's gifts to him are quite ample indeed. All of the men receive shares of the booty that strengthen their warm feelings of fealty to their leader. Sverrir, for his part, receives a few costly golden trinkets – "enough to begin saving for that farm," he thinks.

In the following days, he uses a bit of the gold to pay to have a large memorial stone raised to honor his fallen friend. Although illiterate himself, he pays a local man who is well-versed in the runes to inscribe on the stone, "I, Sverrir, raised this stone for Hauk, who died when kings were fighting."

Such is how one episode in the life of one Viking might have unfolded. The elements in that story were all selected not because they were exceptional, but because they were *unexceptional*. Almost all of them, down

to the details, are routinely attested in the archaeological record and contemporary and later literary accounts of the Viking Age.[1]

This was the world in which the Norse myths and religion flourished. It was a world of startling accomplishment. The Vikings raided throughout Europe, conquered large portions of it, established settlements in Iceland and Greenland, discovered North America 500 years before Christopher Columbus, and traded with peoples who lived in such far-flung places as Egypt and the Persian Gulf. But it was also a world of startling squalor and brutality. Short lifespans, famine, malnutrition, rampant illness and infirmity, perilous ways of making a living, incessant toil for paltry benefits, rough treatment of men and women low on the social pecking order, exposure to bitter cold, and any number of other appalling hardships were facts of life for the Scandinavians of the Viking Age. One lived on the razor's edge between life and death, and life was frequently a nasty business.

DEFINING "NORSE RELIGION"

Before you can have a meaningful discussion of a topic, especially one that centers on terms whose definitions are hotly and endlessly contested, you first have to define the terms you're using so that everyone is on the same page. We'll consider how to define "myth" and "mythology" in Chapter Eleven, but for now, let's go ahead and define "Norse religion." The phrase is comprised of two words, both of which should first be looked at separately before bringing them back together again.

"Norse" here refers to the Old Norse-speaking inhabitants of the lands that are now the countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, as well as the colonies they established throughout northern Europe and elsewhere during the Viking Age (roughly from the late eighth century to the late eleventh century CE). The Norse were a northern branch of the Germanic group of peoples, who in turn were a branch of the Indo-European peoples, who immigrated to Europe from the steppes of modern-day Ukraine and Russia over the course of several millennia beginning in about 4000 BCE, absorbing local populations along the way. It's not entirely clear when the Proto-Germanic language (the first Germanic language, which was spoken by all of the Germanic peoples) became distinct from the Proto-Indo-European language, but it seems to have come into its own no later than the first few centuries BCE. By the start of the Viking Age, the Old Norse language had split off from the earlier, common Germanic language. The Viking Age is typically considered to be the latest part of the Iron Age in

Scandinavia, and the centuries that follow (from the twelfth century onward) are usually considered to be the first "medieval" centuries in Scandinavia – a somewhat different chronology than the one used when discussing the history of the more southerly parts of Europe.[2]

The closely related term "Viking" is usually used in one of two ways: either it refers specifically to the Norse men who went on raiding voyages during the Viking Age, or it more broadly refers to the whole Norse population during the period. While various scholars and laypeople prefer one usage over the other, both have become established and accepted uses. In this book, I use the second, broader definition of "Viking." Thus, unless it's apparent from the context that I'm specifically referring to the northern pirates, which I will do only occasionally, "Viking" and "Norse" are used more or less interchangeably here.

"Religion" may be one of the most difficult words in the modern English language to define. Countless definitions have been proposed over the centuries, which vary greatly in substance as well as in usefulness. In this book, we'll use the definition that is probably the most useful and appropriate to date, which also happens to be one of the most famous: that of the esteemed German philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto. In his classic 1917 work *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige* in the original German), he describes religion as a means of acknowledging and connecting to the "numinous." The numinous is an irreducible category that forms the heart of any and all religions: "There is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name."[3] As the greatest theologians and mystics of all religions have pointed out, the numinous is ineffable. Referring to it at all, whether as "the numinous," "God," "nirvana," "Odin," "Freya," or anything else, is an after-the-fact characterization of something that can't be adequately expressed in language, but can only be truly understood if experienced firsthand. (This is surely one of the reasons why the word "religion" is so notoriously difficult to define.)

Nevertheless, Otto offers some characterizations of the numinous that, while they inevitably fall short of the real thing, point to it exceptionally well. The numinous is something "wholly other"[4] than the things that we experience in our day-to-day lives. It seems to come from a different plane of existence. Confronted with it, one experiences oneself as being "but dust and ashes,"[5] utterly insignificant and inconsequential in the face of something immeasurably greater. It has a majestic, daunting, awe-inspiring, even

terrifying aspect, which Otto calls the *mysterium tremendum*, as well as a blissful, comforting side, which he calls the *mysterium fascinans*.[6]

"Norse religion," then, was the means the Vikings used to acknowledge and to connect to the numinous. It was a set of symbolic ideas, personages, stories, and ritual actions appropriate to facilitating that pursuit within the context of the Vikings' time and place.

Unlike most of the "world religions" with which people today are familiar, the Norse religion was never systematized or codified. There were no creeds or scriptures that defined what was acceptable and unacceptable to believe or to do. That was left up to social custom and personal preference. There were certainly some common rudimentary patterns of belief and behavior, enough that it's reasonable to speak of "Norse religion" in the singular, but even these common elements were fluid, and the details diverged enormously across time and space. Different communities and different individuals had their own variations of the shared religion. While this somewhat *laissez-faire* approach is appealing to many people's taste for individual freedom, it presents certain frustrations for the scholar, as we'll see momentarily when we consider the sources of our present-day knowledge of Norse religion and mythology.

It should also be noted here that applying the term "religion" to particular aspects of Viking experience, belief, and behavior is somewhat anachronistic. The Old Norse language had no word for "religion," and what we call "religion" was seamlessly integrated into the other aspects of life. The religious hierarchy was the same as the "secular" hierarchy. Kings, chieftains, and other rulers were seen as being divine in some capacity. Their rule was seen as being divinely sanctioned. And it was they who led the public religious as well as "secular" activities of the communities they ruled.[7] The numinous was usually contacted as part of an attempt to gain some practical benefit in war, wealth, health, love, interpersonal disputes, etc. Those activities, in turn, were directed in part according to the people's religious conceptions. So while we today tend to isolate religion as a discrete aspect of life, the Vikings tended to see it as inseparably intertwined with every other part of "the way things are," which is why they didn't have a word for it.

SOURCES, METHODS, AND THE PRESENT STATE OF OUR KNOWLEDGE

Before we say much more about Norse religion and mythology, let's first briefly pause to consider a crucial question: how do we know what we know (or think we know) about them? The available evidence for Viking Age religion and mythology comes from several different types of sources, but literary sources inevitably contain the backbone of that evidence, so let's look at them first.

The only written sources we possess directly from pre-Christian times in northern Europe are runic inscriptions, which are all brief and, taken together, tell us very little.[8] The rather sparsely-used runes were the only method of writing the Norse had prior to the introduction of the Latin alphabet, which went hand in hand with the introduction of Christianity in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Viking culture was an oral culture, and even though there were surely traditional poems that dealt with mythic and religious topics, none of these have survived – with a few partial and possible exceptions, as we'll see shortly.

However, we do possess court poetry – called "skaldic poetry" after *skald*, the Old Norse word for "poet" – that dates from the ninth century onwards, which was composed and transmitted orally for many generations before finally being written down in the eleventh through fourteenth centuries, usually in the form of quotations in larger prose works. The purpose of the skaldic poems was to please and praise the kings by whom the skalds were employed. They seldom recount myths in their entirety, but they often allude to myths along the way to make a point. The skaldic poems therefore often enable us to see that at least some version of a myth retold by the medieval authors did indeed exist in the Viking Age.[9]

A major collection of anonymous Old Norse poetry called the *Poetic Edda* was compiled and edited in Iceland in the thirteenth century. (*Poetic Edda* is a modern name; the collection was originally nameless, and was given its current title by seventeenth-century scholars struck by the similarity of its contents to those of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, which we'll examine momentarily.) The poems in this collection are different from typical skaldic poems in their formal structure and in the fact that they *do* set out to recount whole myths. Therefore, they're called "Eddic poetry" to distinguish them from skaldic poetry. Scholars fiercely and endlessly debate the age of these poems. Arguments range from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, and different poems were of course probably composed at different times (and in different places). Similarly, there's little consensus on whether they started out as oral poems or written ones. What we can be sure of, however, is that the form in which they've come down to us is a product

of the thirteenth century, long after the Norse religion had ceased to be a living tradition and had become a topic of antiquarian interest. The editors of the *Poetic Edda* weren't simply compilers; in addition to deciding which poems to include and in which order, they made changes and added a considerable amount of material to the final text of the collection. *Parts* of the collection were *probably* composed during the Viking Age and the period of the transition to Christianity, but other parts of it were *definitely* written by the thirteenth-century editors. These parts include "stage directions" inserted into the bodies of some of the poems, added or subtracted verses, and prose passages that have been placed before and after some of the poems.[10]

Thirteenth-century Iceland has also given us the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, often called the *Prose Edda* to distinguish it from the *Poetic Edda*. No one today knows what the word *Edda* means, and speculation has so far proven mostly unfruitful. Snorri (Icelanders were and are referred to by their first names rather than their last names) was a man of great learning and great ambition – a clergyman, historian, politician, and many other things. He wrote his *Edda* in order to provide a handbook on how to write traditional Old Norse poetry. Since one of the mainstays of that tradition was a system of elaborate, standardized allusions to images, characters, and events from Norse mythology, Snorri endeavored to provide a more or less systematic overview of the old myths as part of his handbook.

Snorri's effort was shaped by two main factors: his sources and his own perspective. Since the oral tradition of retelling the old myths had become a thing of the past by Snorri's day, he had to rely on written sources. These included many of the poems that would later be included in the *Poetic Edda*, skaldic poems, and probably many additional poems that have since been lost. Since we do possess at least some of his sources, we can compare them to Snorri's account to get a sense of his methods. Like any other scholar, Snorri was all too human. He sometimes misinterpreted his sources, glossed over important differences between them in an attempt to present a coherent and systematic narrative, and when his sources left gaps in the story he wanted to tell, he filled them in with his own imagination.[11] Due to his own religious preferences and those of his audience, Snorri presented the Norse religion as the groping attempt of his ancestors to make sense of the world without the all-illuminating revelation that Christ had provided. While it was all manmade folly, Snorri took pains to present his forebears as having anticipated elements of Christianity. He therefore bent and stretched his data to make the Norse myths and beliefs seem closer to those of Christianity

than they actually had been, as well as to account for them within a Christian historical framework.[12] While Snorri was a highly capable scholar by the standards of his time, it's important to remember his lack of firsthand experience of the religion and mythology he describes and the fact that he consciously shaped the material to fit the goals of his project.

The next major category of literary sources to consider is the Icelandic sagas. (The word *saga* is simply Old Norse for "story.") The earliest of the sagas date from the end of the twelfth century, while the latest date from the fourteenth century.[13] Their subject matter, however, concerns events that would have happened centuries earlier. They're mostly anonymous, with the most notable exception being the sagas that comprise the *Heimskringla* ("The History of the Kings of Norway"), which were written by Snorri. By modern standards, the sagas occupy a curious place in between history and fiction. But our modern conception of history didn't arise until centuries after the sagas were written. The saga authors saw themselves as presenting traditional lore, creatively adapting it to make it especially palatable to their audiences, not as presenting impartial, factual accounts of past events backed up by extensive research. In other words, while we think of the authority of a work of history as resting on the scope and quality of its research, the medieval Icelanders saw venerable tradition as the firmest basis for a work's legitimate claims to authority.

Around the same time that Snorri was writing his *Prose Edda* in Iceland, a Danish bishop's clerical assistant by the name of Saxo Grammaticus ("Saxo the Learned") was writing another greatly important work, the *Gesta Danorum* ("History of the Danes"). Unlike Snorri and the saga authors, who wrote in their native Old Norse, Saxo wrote in Latin. Since the accepted wisdom of his day traced the Danish people and their rulers back to mythical origins, Saxo included many of these myths in his account. However, he desacralized them by portraying them as events that had happened at particular times and places in this world, rather than in the hazy, almost timeless otherworld in which the myths had originally been seen as taking place. He also turned many divine figures into human ones. Saxo tells us that his sources were Icelanders and runic inscriptions. But his sources have never been found, so it's impossible to really know what to make of this claim. This is an important question, since he presents remarkably different versions of stories known from Snorri and elsewhere.[14]

Other notable literary sources are accounts by foreign authors, such as the German Adam of Bremen, who includes a famous description of a temple at Uppsala in Sweden in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-*

Bremen, and Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, an Arabic writer who has bequeathed to us a lavish account of a Viking burial in Eastern Europe.

The most important non-literary sources to consider are archaeological ones, such as graves and picture-stones. Archaeology is an appealing source because of how pure and untrammeled it's often thought to be. After all, it comes directly from the hands of the Vikings themselves. But beneath its apparent purity, archaeology is actually highly problematic. Of all of the various types of sources, archaeological ones are by far the most difficult to interpret, and yet are the ones in most need of interpretation. Generally speaking, we can only make sense of what archaeology gives us with reference to the later literary sources. While archaeology can thereby corroborate some of the information provided in the later literary sources, there is always a risk of forcing the archaeological evidence to fit a particular, artificial mold, since we're essentially ignorant of what it might mean apart from the particular interpretive filters of the later written works. Rather than standing closer to the Vikings than the literary sources of later periods, archaeological evidence is, paradoxically, often actually one step *farther* away from the Vikings than the literary sources.[15]

Another fruitful source of information and insight into Norse religion and mythology is cross-cultural comparisons with other peoples with whom the Norse stood in some particularly meaningful relationship. By comparing otherwise perplexing details from written sources and archaeology with better-known practices and beliefs of related peoples, we can often come to understand Norse mythology and religion more fully. The closest cultures with which we can compare elements of Norse culture are those of the other Germanic groups such as the Anglo-Saxons of England and the continental Germanic tribes; other Indo-European groups such as the Indians (of India), Celts, Slavs, Greeks, and Romans; the Sámi, the traditionally nomadic people of northern Scandinavia; and, in some special cases, other circumpolar Eurasian groups from farther afield, such as the indigenous peoples of Siberia.

Additional sources of note include law codes, place-names, linguistic evidence, and folklore from later periods. When a law code prohibits something, we can be reasonably certain that it was practiced. Written law codes from the Christian era in northern Europe often prohibit activities that sound like vestiges of pre-Christian practice, which can sometimes provide us with additional clues as to what exactly those practices involved. Place-names from the Norse countries occasionally contain the name of a deity and/or a word that signals the presence of some kind of holy site, which

furnishes us with additional information on which gods and goddesses were actually worshipped (rather than just being literary characters), how frequently, and where. Studying the words that the Norse used to refer to particular concepts, beings, etc. can give us clues about the meanings of those concepts and the characters of those beings. We'll find numerous examples of this throughout this book. And folklore from the medieval and early modern periods occasionally preserves elements of beliefs and practices from the Viking Age and earlier, although this type of source must be handled especially carefully due to the difficulty of locating elements of ancient religion and mythology amongst the much larger proportion of more recent innovations.

What does the nature of these sources mean for the study of Norse mythology and religion? As we've seen, there are no sources that we can take at face value. All of our sources carry potential problems and pitfalls, and the most significant sources are also often the most hazardous. Furthermore, since Norse mythology and religion were never codified or systematized by those who actually believed in and practiced them, a source that describes the beliefs or practices of one particular locality or person can't necessarily be assumed to speak for the entirety of the pre-Christian Norse population. Only by critically analyzing all of these disparate sources in relation to one another can we arrive at a reliable and substantial picture of what Norse mythology and religion actually looked like. This picture will never be anything close to complete, and it will never be without its difficulties, but the picture we have is vivid and fascinating indeed.

Chapter 2: Gods and Goddesses

THE NATURE OF THE NORSE DEITIES

When you hear the word "god," what kind of image pops into your mind? Perhaps you think of what most Christians, Jews, and Muslims call "God" with a capital "G:" a supreme being who created the world singlehandedly, who is all-powerful yet all-loving, and who has a "plan" for everyone (or at least certain favored people) that is supposed to ultimately work out to their benefit. Or perhaps you think of the Greek gods and goddesses, most of whom could be referred to as the god or goddess "of" one particular thing with a tolerable degree of accuracy: Artemis, goddess of the hunt; Aphrodite, goddess of love; Ares, god of war; or Asklepios, god of healing.

The Norse gods and goddesses were none of those things. They weren't "supreme," they weren't particularly benevolent, and they had personalities as rich and multifaceted as those of the most complicated humans, which couldn't be reduced to any simple formula like "god of x" without expressing only a fraction of the deity's character and sphere of influence.

What *were* they, then?

We can start to answer that question by considering the words that Old Norse speakers used to refer to them. The most widely-used word for "god" was *áss*, or *æsir* in the plural ("gods"). Its corresponding feminine form for "goddess" was *ásynja*, or *ásynjur* in the plural ("goddesses"). When referred to as a collective that included both gods and goddesses, the masculine plural *æsir* was used. These words are all derived from one of two Proto-Germanic roots: **ansaz*, "pole, beam, rafter," or **ansuz*, "life, vitality."[1] In either case, this etymology (where a word comes from) suggests that the gods were the metaphorical "poles" or "vital forces" that held together and sustained the cosmos and its order. They were very much a part of the cosmos rather than beings who merely manipulated it from the outside. When the cosmos arose, they arose with it as part of the same process. And when the cosmos will fall, as the Norse prophecies of Ragnarok foretell, the gods will fall with it. Etymology, myth, and religion all complement and reinforce each other here, which points to this having been a central Norse theological concept.