

Encyclopedia  
of **NORSE** and  
**GERMANIC**  
**FOLKLORE,**  
**MYTHOLOGY,**  
and **MAGIC**



CLAUDE LECOUTEUX

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CLAUDE LECOUTEUX

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Edited by Michael Moynihan



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*To Corinne, ut semper,  
and to Perrine  
for her first birthday*

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Fig. 1. Picture stone from Lärbro on the island of Gotland, Sweden, eighth century. Photo by Jürgen Howaldt.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

# HOW TO USE THIS ENCYCLOPEDIA

Claude Lecouteux's *Encyclopedia of Norse and Germanic Folklore, Mythology, and Magic* offers a stimulating and fascinating overview of its vast subject matter, which is drawn from the ancient and medieval cultures of Europe, England, and Scandinavia. While this is not the only reference handbook available in English that deals with Norse mythological material, it truly distinguishes itself with the veritable wealth of Germanic folkloric and legendary material that appears here—much of it previously inaccessible to English readers.

We have endeavored to faithfully reproduce various original names and terms in keeping with the traditional orthography (spelling) from languages such as Old Norse, Old English, and modern Icelandic. Two letters that may be unfamiliar to some readers are those known as “eth” (Ð/ð) and “thorn” (Þ/þ), which represent the sound that is reproduced as /th/ in modern texts (the character “eth” corresponds to the voiced /th/ sound, as in the English word “that,” while “thorn” corresponds to the unvoiced /th/ sound, as in the English word “thin”). Entry names that begin with the letter Þ appear in the T section, alphabetized as if they begin with “Th.”

Old Norse—and its descendant, modern Icelandic—is a highly inflected language, and one indication of this is in the nominative final *-r* ending that appears on certain nouns. This includes many proper names such as Freyr and Heimdallr, Asgarðr (Asgard), Miðgarðr (Midgard), and so forth. The original orthography is generally retained throughout the encyclopedia entries, except for the god names—Odin and Thor—which generally appear in their modern, anglicized spellings instead of their Old Norse forms (Óðinn, Þórr).

Occasionally a reference is made to certain names or words for which no literal attestation exists. This may be due to their great age or simply the arbitrary nature of the historical record that has come down to us. These earlier forms, which have been reliably reconstructed by historical linguists, appear preceded by an asterisk. Two examples would be the names of the proto-Germanic deities \*Nerthuz (the antecedent of the continental goddess Nerthus and the Norse god Njörðr) and \*Tiwaz (the antecedent of the Norse god Týr, the Anglo-Saxon god Tiw, and the continental German god Ziu).

In the presentation of the individual entries, the English edition follows the same basic format as its French predecessor. The keyword appears in bold capital letters, followed by a translation/interpretation of the word—for example, **ÁLFHEIMR** (“**World of the Elves**”). When relevant, additional grammatical information may be

included, such as sg. (singular) and pl. (plural), as well as the gender of the noun itself: masc. (masculine), fem. (feminine), or neut. (neuter).

Many entries are followed by suggestions for further reading. References to books appear first, concisely cited by the author's last name together with the main title of the book. For the complete information on a given book, the reader should refer to the bibliography at the back of the encyclopedia. Articles or essays are given full citations as they are not included in the bibliography. These references for further reading are not meant to be complete, nor do they provide the history of scholarship on a given topic, which is often vast. They are simply Professor Lecouteux's suggestions of a few useful starting points that a curious reader may wish to investigate further. With regard to Norse entries in particular, more detailed information can be found by consulting John Lindow's *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) or Rudolf Simek's *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1993). The latter work in particular provides detailed references on the history of the scholarship that has been done on these topics. Neither of these volumes makes any attempt to systematically deal with Germanic folklore or continental literature, however.

## INTRODUCTION

# NORSE AND GERMANIC MYTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE

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### Traditions of Considerable Influence

Interest in Norse and Germanic mythology has been growing in recent decades, yet it probably remains less well known to the public at large than Celtic—and especially Arthurian—mythology, which has enjoyed a long period of popularity in Western Europe and North America. For many people, the main frame of reference for Germanic and Norse myth is through Wagner’s Ring Cycle, which has done as much harm as good to its source material. Furthermore, Germanic mythology still has an unsavory reputation due to its appropriation for some aspects of Nazi ideology, which has led many to view it as a vehicle for pernicious ideas. Fortunately, there is no truth to this as it is a misunderstanding of the modern myth of the blond, “Aryan” German, a notion that was itself based on erroneous interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Another modern myth, that of the Viking, has popularized the image of burly, violent, bloodthirsty brutes swearing oaths in the name of Odin and Thor and drinking mead from the skulls of their victims.<sup>2</sup> This is the stock portrait of Vikings that we often come across in popular movies and books, or in graphic novels such as *Asterix and the Normans*. In this regard it is interesting to note that in Normandy, France, even into the nineteenth century, the prayer “*A furore Normannorum libera nos domine*” (Lord, deliver us from the fury of the Northmen!) continued to be included among the litanies of the church. Distorted by these sorts of misunderstandings, ancient Germanic and Norse civilization tends to repel rather than attract, all the more so as the bulk of serious works on the topic have been restricted to academics. Germanic mythology remains the victim of prejudice.

The influence of the ancient Germanic peoples on the development of European culture has been considerable. It is too often forgotten that the Franks, who gave their name to the nation of France, were a Germanic people, and French civilization is in fact the result of a massive commingling of Celto-Gallic, Roman, and Germanic cultures. The place-names of France still show vestiges of the Germanic invaders who settled in various regions: the Burgundians in the Rhône Valley and Savoy, the Saxons in Boullonnois, the Alemanni in Alsace, the Visigoths in Narbonnais, and the Taifals in Poitou.

We may ask, then, just what does *Germanic* mean? This adjective is descriptive of a number of peoples who originally all spoke the same language. The result of what happens when those who share a common tongue split off into separate groups is, however, well known: the language evolves differently in each group. We have good examples of this with Portuguese and Spanish, American English and British English, Afrikaans and Dutch. The Germanic linguistic branch contains three major families: North Germanic (represented by Norse and other Scandinavian dialects); East Germanic (mainly attested in Gothic, now a dead language, which—as its name indicates—was spoken by the Goths); and the West Germanic (represented by English and the continental High and Low German dialects).<sup>3</sup>

Germanic mythology is the codified, organized expression of these people and their civilization, beliefs, and religion. Dubbed “paganism” by Christianity, it was vigorously attacked on the one hand but also so successfully acculturated in other respects that only scattered fragments remained: here the name of a god, there the description of a cultural practice or epic legends featuring mysterious figures, and elsewhere personal and place-names that derived from those of the gods. While this body of evidence is sufficient to show that all of these peoples shared a common background, it does not allow us to compile an English or a German mythology, even if we include the information provided by Roman and Byzantine authors,<sup>4</sup> as well as that which is provided by epigraphy,<sup>5</sup> rune stones, and the church texts condemning pagan beliefs. Two medieval writers, the Goth Jordanes and the Lombard Paul the Deacon (Paulus Diaconus), also give us some valuable information.

## I. THE SOURCES

The oldest accounts of the gods of the Germans were left to us by Caesar and Tacitus, and, despite the Roman interpretation of the data, they corroborate what the more recent texts tell us. In *The Gallic War*, Caesar reports:

Among the gods, they most worship Mercury [Odin]. There are numerous images of him; they declare him the inventor of all arts, the guide of every road and journey, and they deem him to have the greatest influence for all money-making and traffic. After him they set Apollo [=Baldr?], Mars [=Týr?], Jupiter [=Thor?], and Minerva [=Freyja?]. Of these deities they have almost the same idea as all other nations: Apollo drives away diseases, Minerva supplies the first principles of arts and crafts, Jupiter holds the empire of heaven, Mars controls wars.<sup>6</sup>

Our knowledge of the Germanic goddess Nerthus comes from the Roman historian Tacitus, who writes:

Collectively [the Germanic tribes] worship Nerthus, or Mother Earth, and

believe that she takes part in human affairs and rides among the peoples.<sup>7</sup>

She lives in a sacred grove on an island and has a son named Tuisto (the name means “Double” or “Hermaphrodite”), who corresponds to the giant Ymir, a significant figure in the Norse cosmogony.

Our principal sources are the Eddas: the *Poetic Edda*, consisting of poems collected in the *Codex Regius* (written down around 1270, based on an original that an oral tradition maintains was lost, as well as on even older writings),<sup>8</sup> and the *Prose Edda*, which we shall discuss in greater detail.

Around 1223 the great Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson (1197–1241) wrote his *Prose Edda*,<sup>9</sup> also known as the *Snorra Edda* (Snorri’s Edda), which consists of the following three parts.

*Gylfaginning* (The Deluding of Gylfi),<sup>10</sup> a systematic exposition of the mythic material and an exhaustive, rational portrait of the ancient religion.

*Skáldskaparmál* (Treatise on the Skaldic Art), a collection of poetic circumlocutions (*kenningar*, sg. *kenning*) and bynames (*heiti*) designating persons, objects, and concepts accompanied by a brief summary explaining the origin of this or that turn of phrase—why gold is called “Kraki’s seed,” for example, or even “Fróði’s flour.”

*Háttatal* (The List of Meters), a treatise on traditional alliterative verse forms.

One manuscript of the *Snorra Edda*, the *Trektarbók*, also includes extremely valuable lists of names under the headings of “giants,” “trolls,” “dwarves,” and so forth. In Old Norse these lists are known as *þulur* (sg.: *þula*).

Taken together, the Eddas form a coherent narrative that is rich with intertextual relationships. They represent a system of thought, a vision and explanation of the world. This system imposes order on a set of preexisting beliefs, with all their attendant innovations, in order to achieve a homogenous result.<sup>11</sup> But the human imagination relies on memory, and it is not always faithful, which results in hodgepodes, overlaps, and obscure passages. Some of the lays from the *Poetic Edda* also include long *þulur* lists of mythical figures (such as dwarves and giants), rivers, and horses, about which we often know nothing further, because we lack any other information about them. Are these catalogs of names an epic amplification, or do they serve some mnemonic purpose? Are the creatures and places cited of great antiquity, or are they of more recent provenance? Such questions are often very hard to answer.

We possess a variety of texts that serve as secondary sources. Foremost among these would have to be the first twenty chapters of the *Ynglinga saga* (Saga of the Ynglings), which is the first part of *Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson.<sup>12</sup> The *Heimskringla* is a history of the kings of Norway that begins with the tales of their mythic ancestors. In this text the gods are depicted as deified men.

There is also the *Gesta Danorum* (History of the Danes), which Saxo Grammaticus composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>13</sup> In Saxo's work, mythology is transposed into a novel and an epic.

To the above sources we may add the poetry of the skalds<sup>14</sup> and the sagas, which are useful for cross-referencing what is found in the other texts and provide confirmation for certain details. The sagas are also of undeniable value, for in them we find accounts of the worship of gods, beliefs in elves (*álfar*) and local land spirits (*landvættir*), and so on.

Altogether the sources provide us with more than a thousand mythological names. These are not all of equal importance, however, so I have chosen to include only entries for those names that are featured in a complete text or in one that is fragmentary yet still intelligible. I have also included entries for significant figures from Germanic folklore and those that have played an important role in literature and the arts, from the German Romantic era to the novels of Tolkien.

## II. THE GERMANIC GODS

As a result of the work of the medieval mythographers who compiled the Norse and Germanic myths, we know that the gods were divided into two major families: that of the Æsir (the plural form of *áss*, “god”), which primarily represented the warrior class but also included female goddesses referred to as the *Ásynjur* (sg.: *Ásynja*), and that of the Vanir, which was representative of fertility, magic, and peaceful relationships based on pleasure. Before discussing the gods, however, we need to provide the context for their activities.

### *Theogony and Cosmogony*

At the dawn of time there was only a fathomless void—Ginnungagap—that stretched between Niflheimr, the land of ice and shadows in the north, and Muspellsheimr, the realm of fire in the south. Rivers flowing out of the south toward Niflheimr would come to a halt in vast, icy masses. These masses of frozen water filled the void, where increasingly warmer winds caused them to melt. The drops of water, revitalized by the wind, fused to form the body of the giant Ymir. The cow Auðumla was born in the same way, and her milk fed Ymir. When Ymir started sweating, a man and woman began to grow beneath his left arm, and one of his feet engendered a son from the other foot. By licking the ice, Auðumla caused the emergence of a man named Búri, who was able to reproduce like Ymir. He had a son, Burr (or Borr), who married Bestla, a descendant of Ymir. From their union were born the gods Óðinn (Odin), Vili, and Vé, who killed Ymir and built the world out of his body. Once they had finished they placed a dwarf at each corner of the sky to uphold the celestial vault. According to the *Poetic Edda*, this is how the gods were born and how the Earth was created.

The universe consists of various worlds. These include Miðgarðr, the “Middle Enclosure” and the world of men; Ásgarðr, the “Enclosure of the Æsir” and thus the world of the gods, which is connected to Miðgarðr by a “rainbow” called Bifröst, or

Ásbrú (Æsir-Bridge); and Útgarðr, the “Outer Enclosure” which is the land of giants, demons, and all the malevolent beings. Beneath Miðgarðr lies the realm of the dead, which is ruled by the goddess Hel. The vertical stability of the universe is secured by Yggdrasill, the cosmic tree and world axis, which the Saxons called the Irminsúl (“Pillar of the God Irmin”), and its horizontal coherence by the Miðgarðsormr (Midgard Serpent), the huge sea serpent that is coiled around the Earth.

### ***The Æsir***

The most important of the Æsir gods are Óðinn and his sons, Þórr (Thor) and Baldr (Balder); Týr; Heimdallr; and Loki. They live in Ásgarðr, which they had a giant build for them. Located here is Valhalla (Valhöll), the hall of warriors slain in combat, where valkyries serve the valiant dead—the single fighters (*einherjar*) who will act as Óðinn’s troops for the world’s final battle—the meat of the boar Sæhrímnir and the mead that flows from the udder of the goat Heiðrun.

Óðinn (Wuotan in Old High German, Wodan in Old Saxon, and Woden in Old English) is the supreme god and the chieftain of the divine pantheon. He is the master of runes and magic, the knowledge of which he acquired during nine days and nights hanging on the World Tree, Yggdrasill. Óðinn “was able to cause his enemies to be blind or deaf or fearful in battle, and he could cause their swords to cut no better than wands. His own men went to battle without coats of mail and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls.”<sup>15</sup> These were the wild warriors known as the *berserkir* (berserkers), which literally means “bear-shirts.” Óðinn is also the master of poetry.

When the universe was young, the two divine families of the Æsir and the Vanir were at war with one another. Neither side could defeat the other, however, and to seal a peace treaty they spit into a large vessel. From this saliva they created a man named Kvasir, who was profoundly wise. He was slain one day by two dwarves, who poured his blood into a cauldron and mixed it with honey. Whoever drank of this nectar would become a great poet. A giant killed the dwarves, took the beverage, and kept it inside a mountain. Óðinn managed to steal it from the giant by changing himself into a snake.

Óðinn is the guide of souls (psychopomp), and it is he who selects those warriors who will fall on the battlefield and be carried into Valhalla by the valkyries. Cynical and cruel, apt at changing his appearance and his form, Óðinn was interpreted by classical authors as being equivalent to the god Mercury. He was depicted as a one-eyed, graying old man who wears a blue mantle and a broad hat that slopes down and hides his face. He lives exclusively on wine and owns two ravens, Huginn and Muninn (“Thought” and “Memory”), who bring him news of the world because he has endowed them with the power of speech. His attributes include the spear Gungnir, the magic ring Draupnir, and the eight-legged horse Sleipnir, which can be seen depicted on several of the Gotlandic picture stones. Finally, Óðinn was endowed with many bynames that accurately reflect all the aspects of his activity and his many skills: “God of Cargoes,” “Most High,” “All-father,” “Masked One,” “Multifarious One,” “Terrible One,” and so on. One of these names is explained as follows: “at times he would call to life dead men out of the ground, or he would sit down under men that were hanged;

on this account he was called Lord of Ghouls or of the Hanged.”<sup>16</sup>

Óðinn’s wife is Frigg (Langobardic Frea, Old High German Frîja, Old English Frige), who owns a falcon cloak, an allusion to an early ability to shapeshift. Her son is Baldr, nicknamed “the Good.” After having several dire dreams, she asked and received the pledge of all the elements, all plants, all metals, all wood, all stones, and all diseases that they would spare her son, but she forgot to ask this of the mistletoe, a branch of which then mortally injures Baldr during a sporting event. Inconsolable, Óðinn charged his son Hermóðr with the task of going to the realm of the dead and coming back with Baldr. The goddess Hel agrees to let Baldr leave, provided that all of creation will weep for him, but the god Loki, responsible for his murder, refuses, and Hel keeps hold of her prey.

Óðinn’s second son is Þórr (Thor, literally “Thunder”; Donar in Old High German, Þunor in Old English, Thunær in Old Saxon), born from the coupling of the master of the pantheon with the giantess Jörð (Earth). He is the strongest of the gods and lives in Þrúðvangr. Quick to anger and truculent, he has a red beard and an incredible appetite. He owns the hammer Mjöllnir (with which he smashes the giants), a pair of iron gloves necessary to wield the hammer, a belt that doubles his strength, and two goats that pull his chariot when he travels.

Þórr is famous for his battles against monsters. Once, on a fishing trip, he almost managed to catch the Midgard Serpent. He also rules over thunder and lightning, wind and rain. His wife is Sif, who bore him two sons, Magni (“Strength”) and Móði (“Courage”), and a daughter, Þrúðr (“Force”).

Týr (Tiw in Old English) is the son of Óðinn or of the giant Hymir. He is a god of justice whose name underlies that of the weekday Tuesday (Old English *tiwesdæg*; Old Norse *týsdagr*). He is the guardian of the world’s order and the patron of the legal assemblies of free men. He is one-armed after having placed his hand as a pledge in the mouth of the wolf Fenrir, whom the gods sought to bind because he had grown so large he had become a threat: “all prophecies foretold that it was destined to cause them harm.”<sup>17</sup> Their first two attempts at binding the wolf ended in failure, and the gods then asked the dwarves to forge a new fetter. Now suspicious, Fenrir demanded that a god place his hand in his mouth, otherwise he would not submit to being shackled. “Tyr put forward his right hand and put it in the wolf’s mouth. And now when the wolf kicked, the band grew harder, and the harder he struggled, the tougher became the band. Then they all laughed except for Tyr. He lost his hand.”<sup>18</sup> Týr is undoubtedly the oldest of all the deities, and his name simply means “god” (it is cognate with Latin *deus* and Sanskrit *dyaus*).

Heimdallr, who is referred to as the “white god,” is the guardian of the gods. He lives at the end of the sky and keeps watch over the bridge leading to Ásgarðr. The *Prose Edda* informs us about Heimdallr: “He needs less sleep than a bird. He can see, by night just as well as by day, a distance of hundreds of leagues. He can also hear the grass growing on the earth and wool on sheep and everything that sounds louder than that. He has a trumpet called Gjallarhorn and its blast can be heard in all worlds.”<sup>19</sup> We may add that he has gold teeth, carries a sword, and his horse is named Gullfaxi (“Golden Mane”). At the end of the world, he and Loki will kill each other.

Loki is an extremely complex god: the embodiment of evil, a troublemaker, and a sower of discord. He is the son of Laufey and the giant Farbauti. His wife is Sigyn, with whom he had a son. The giantess Angrboða bore him three children: the wolf Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent, both of whom play important roles in the eschatological battle, and Hel, the goddess of the dead.

These are the leading members of the Æsir. The Eddas and place-names provide us with many other names, but this information can be as scanty as the mention of a nickname. An example would be Ullr, known as the “bow god,” “ski god,” or “hunting god,” whose ancient significance is, however, apparent from an enigmatic remark by Saxo Grammaticus: Ollerus (Ullr) allegedly ruled over the gods when Othinus (Odin) was exiled.

Some deities were later removed from the pantheon and transformed into simple heroes; the best example is Völundr (Wayland), who was most certainly a smith god, a gold-crafting god closely connected to the elves. All we know about Sól, the sun goddess, is that she was punished for a mismatch. The gods placed her in the sky where she travels every day in a chariot drawn by two horses, pursued by a wolf that seeks to devour her.

### ***The Vanir***

The second family of gods is that of the Vanir, who seem older than the Æsir. It is thought they represent a settled culture (farmers) that was subjugated by a more warlike nomadic culture (hunters, gatherers, fishermen). A great myth tells how they gained a seat among the Æsir in Ásgarðr. The Vanir sent a witch named Gullveig (her name means “Drunkenness for Gold,” which may suggest that the Vanir believed a lust for precious metal would make the Æsir less bellicose) to the Æsir. The Æsir sought to wrest Gullveig’s secrets from her, and when she refused to reveal them they tried to burn her—in vain. The Vanir demanded reparation for these violent acts, asking for either a payment of tribute or admittance among the Æsir. The Æsir preferred to settle the matter by weapons. The war was long and hard, and neither side could win. A truce was finally declared and an exchange of hostages took place: the Vanir gave their most distinguished men, Njörðr and his son Freyr, while the Æsir offered Mímir, a man of deep wisdom, and Hœnir. This was how a new family of gods appeared in Ásgarðr.

The Vanir are essentially represented by Njörðr and his children Freyr and Freyja. They are agrarian gods with connections to the land and water; they dispense goods and pleasures, wealth and fertility, love and peace. The main Vanir god is Freyr (“Lord”), who is the son of Njörðr. He commands the rains, sunshine, and plant life, and, according to Adam of Bremen, he was depicted with an enormous phallus in the temple at Uppsala. The pig and the stallion are his preferred animals. He lives in Ásgarðr in a home called Álfheimr (“World of the Elves”) and owns a marvelous boat—it can be folded up, it always has a good wind, and all the Æsir can fit on it—and a boar with gold bristles. His wife is the giantess Gerðr, whom he won at the expense of his sword. One day in the land of the giants he spied a splendid young woman, Gerðr, daughter of the giant Gymir, and fell desperately in love with her. Freyr’s friend

Skírnir borrowed his sword and horse and set off to retrieve her; after many ups and downs and through the use of magic, Skírnir (Freyr's "messenger") was successful in his undertaking but loses the sword and Freyr will not have it during the Last Battle when he confronts the fire giant Surtr, who will slay him.

At one time Freyr had a connection with the elves inhabiting Álfheimr, a heavenly realm that was his domain. During this earlier stage Freyr and the elves were probably not entirely separate beings. The elves are experts in magic and detest blemishes and impurities. Historically elves were worshipped, and sacrifices were made to them. In more recent folk beliefs they represent the "good dead" (that is, the good ancestors, elevated to the status of guardian spirits).

Freyja ("Lady"), Freyr's sister, is famed for her gaiety, and the worship devoted to her was erotic in nature. She lives in Fólkvangr and travels in a chariot drawn by cats. Her sphere of activity includes life, battle and death (she shares half of the deceased with Óðinn), fertility, and black magic. She adores jewels and adornments, and one text describes how she came into possession of her famous necklace. Four dwarves lived in a cave near to her palace. One day she saw they had a gold necklace, and she burned with the desire to own it. They refused to sell it to her but instead demanded that she sleep with each of them in exchange for it. She accepted their bargain and received the jewelry. But Loki told Óðinn about this, and Óðinn ordered the trickster god to steal the necklace, which he did by shapeshifting into various animals. Freyja eventually got her item back, however.

A word should be said about the dwarves that are linked to the gods in many myths. They were alive at the origin of the world; one tradition states that they were born from the putrefaction of the body of the primordial giant Ymir. They are skilled blacksmiths who craft all the treasures of the gods, as we have seen, as well as baleful weapons. They are thieves and magicians, and they maintain close relations with the dead (so much so that some scholars think they are the mythic transposition of dangerous dead individuals with evil intent). In fact, the dwarves' names often connote the idea of death. They inhabit the stones and mounds, and they will themselves turn to stone if they are caught out in the light of day.

### III. RAGNARÖK AND THE RENEWAL OF THE WORLD

The death of the gods comes about during the eschatological battle called Ragnarök, "the final destiny of the gods," a scenario that was popularized by Richard Wagner in modern times as the *Götterdämmerung*, or "Twilight of the Gods." A Dantean apocalypse of a peerless evocative power, Ragnarök is heralded by a series of terrifying events: three dreadful winters during which the sun will not shine, and then three more winters accompanied by huge battles across the entire world and in which fathers and sons will slay one another. Next, the wolf Sköll will eat the sun and the wolf Hati will devour the moon; the Earth will quake; trees will be uprooted; the mountains will collapse; the wolf Fenrir will break free from his bonds, and the sea will flood over the Earth because the Midgard Serpent has come ashore. Naglfar, the boat made from the toenails and fingernails of the dead, will set sail with a giantess or

Loki at the helm. Fenrir will trot along with his mouth gaping wide—the upper jaw touching the heavens and the lower one the earth—ready to swallow up everything, and the Midgard Serpent will spew its venom. The heavens will part, and the giants, the “sons of the Muspell,” will come forth, led by Surtr, and advance to the plain where the final battle will be waged. The Æsir and the *einherjar* will don their armor and emerge through the 540 gates of Valhalla, in rows of 800, with Odin at their head.

Thor will advance at [Odin’s] side and be unable to aid him because he will have his hands full fighting the Midgard Serpent. Freyr will fight Surt and there will be a harsh conflict before Freyr falls. . . . Then will also have got free the dog Garm, which is bound in front of Gniphellir. This is the most evil creature. He will have a battle with Tyr and they will each be the death of the other. Thor will be victorious over the Midgard Serpent and will step away from it nine paces. Then he will fall to the ground dead from the poison which the serpent will spit at him. The wolf will swallow Odin. That will be the cause of his death. And immediately after Vidar will come forward and step with one foot on the lower jaw of the wolf. On this foot he will have a shoe for which the material has been collected throughout all time. . . . With one hand he will grasp the wolf’s upper jaw and tear apart its mouth and this will cause the wolf’s death. Loki will have a battle with Heimdall and they will cause each other’s death. After that Surt will fling fire over the earth and burn the whole world.<sup>20</sup>

But Ragnarök is not the end. It is the herald of a renewal, because two minor gods will survive: Óðinn’s sons Víðarr and Váli. They will soon be joined by the sons of Þórr, Móði and Magni, and then by Baldr and Höðr. Furthermore, two human beings will also survive: Líf (“Life”) and Lífþrasir (“Striving for Life”), who will feed on the morning dew and repopulate the world that is lit by the daughter of Sól (the sun).

#### IV. THE SURVIVAL OF THE GODS

The ancient mythological figures that have survived Christianization are rare. After a transitional period during which paganism and the Christian faith were commingled, they were preserved linguistically in place-names and in frozen expressions and metaphors. This is how “Odin” and “troll” later became synonyms for the devil. Some figures were transformed and incorporated into folk legends—the troll became a dwarf in Scandinavia and in the Shetland islands, where it is called *trow*—but an examination of charms and spells reveals their persistent survival. The former minor lunar goddess Bil can be seen in the *Bilwiz*, a figure in medieval folk beliefs. During the eighteenth century Odin became the leader of the Wild Hunt, as the scholar Johann Peter Schmidt, writing in 1742, informs us.

It is said in particular that this younger Odin was an archmagician and had no peer in the arts of making war. This is why some people have sought to see his name Woden as a derivative of “to rage” (*wüten*). Further, no one is unaware of the senseless belief held by countless folk, especially some hunters, that the time around Christmas and on the eve of Carnival (*Fastel-Abend*) is when the one called Woor or Goor or the Wild Huntsman passes. They say the Devil organizes a hunt with a troop of rapping spirits. If we get to the bottom of this superstition, we see that it emerged from the story of this younger Odin, and that the common man thinks that Odin or Wodan passes. This is why a company of ghosts like this is called the Furious Army, Wodan’s Army, Gooden’s Army, or the Army of Odin.<sup>21</sup>

The various Germanic countries did not all share the same course of historical development over time, and the folk traditions of Iceland and Norway have conserved a number of ancient mythological elements. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that scholars and researchers, influenced by the work of Jacob Grimm, were able to shed new light on these gods who had been relegated to the shadows. Richard Wagner, through his operatic Ring Cycle, contributed to an increased awareness of these mythological figures, but in the decades that followed a pernicious ideology took hold of some aspects of the mythology and utilized them toward creating the myth of a great Reich. These developments served to discredit Germanic mythology for decades. However, recent scholarly studies, undertaken in the wake of the work done by the Indo-Europeanist Georges Dumézil, have demonstrated the significance of the Germanic gods in a wider comparative perspective. Thanks to these new directions, the subject is gradually being relieved of the prejudices with which it was formerly burdened. In fact, the gods of the Germanic-Norse pantheon are simply a local form, an ecotype, of a much larger group whose roots are in the Indo-European world, as has been shown by the multiple parallels shared with other cultures.

## V. FOLK MYTHOLOGY

In addition to the scholarly mythology that was passed down by the ancient mythographers, there also exists an entire network of constantly evolving representations and folk beliefs. From this, an image emerges of a distinctive world in which elemental and supernatural beings are no longer the denizens of a distant pantheon but live in close proximity to humans—in the forests and mountains, beneath the stones, and so forth. We occasionally encounter the faded figures of high mythology here, but we also find many other elements. The majority of these beings, which are today labeled as fantasy creatures, continue to live on in folktales and legends—two sources that should never be overlooked, for they contain many riches. The work of the Brothers Grimm, for example, provides a fine overview with its wealth of nixies and kobolds, ogres and giants, changelings and dwarves, not to mention major figures like Frau Holle or Holda, Percht, Loyal Eckart, or the Cursed

Huntsman.

Following in the footsteps of Johann Gottfried Herder and the Brothers Grimm, many German romantic poets and writers took up these themes, creatures, and folk beliefs, such as we see in Friedrich de la Motte-Fouqué's *Undine*, Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl*, and in the tales of the Erlking, the Lorelei, and Tannhäuser. A complete list of such borrowings would be long indeed. These themes were, in turn, taken up by musical composers and enjoyed unending success throughout the nineteenth century.

The folkloric elements must all be taken into account if one wishes to draw a good panorama of Germanic mythology, and not merely its Scandinavian branch.

## VI. MYTHOLOGY, ARTS, AND LITERATURE

Germanic mythology has had significant impact on literature and the arts. I can only present a small overview of this here.<sup>\*1 22</sup> There are artists such as Henry Fuseli (Füssli), who gave us the famous painting *Thor Battering the Midgard Serpent* (1780), or Mårten Eskil Winge (*Thor's Fight with the Giants*, 1872; *Loki and Sigyn*, 1863), Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (*The Death of Balder*, 1817), Nils Blommér (*Loki and Sigyn*, ca. 1850), John Charles Dollman (*Hermod in Hel; Sif; Thor; The Ride of the Valkyries*; ca. 1900), Dorothy Hardy (*The Binding of Fenris; Loki and Thiassi*; ca. 1909), Peter Nicolai Arbo (*The Wild Hunt*, 1872; *Valkyrie*, 1865/1869), and Moritz von Schwind (*The Dance of the Elves*, ca. 1860). Mythological themes have been taken up by sculptors like Hermann Ernst Freund (*Balder*, 1821; *Thor*, 1828–1829; *Idunn*, 1821; *Loki*, statuette in wood, 1822; *Mimir and Balder*, bas-relief, 1822), Dagfin Werenskiöld (*Odin and Mimir*, bas-relief, 1938), and Bengt Erland Fogelberg (*Frey*, 1818), to mention just a few examples, and in Stuttgart there is a public fountain, the *Schicksalsbrunnen* (Well of Fate), designed by Karl Donndorf. It is safe to say that all the principal gods of the Germanic pantheon have been well represented in the arts.

References have also been made to the Germanic gods in modern maritime contexts. For example, we may note that Norwegian boats have borne the names *Ægir*, *Brage*, and *Heimdallr*, and Dutch ships have been named *Freyr* and *Balder*. Icelandic and Swedish ships were named *Thor* and *Ran*, and a German sailing yacht has the name *Freya*.

Literature shows no shortage of Germanic mythological themes either. There are literary works that depend on the reader having some knowledge of Germanic and Norse mythology in order to understand their content. Such is the case with the poem *Der Wein* (The Wine) by Friedrich von Hagedorn and *Die Irmin-Säule* (Irmin's Pillar) by Gerhard Anton von Halem, as likewise with Adam Oehlenschläger's 1807 tragedy *Baldur hin Gode* (Balder the Good). In an epic ballad Wilhelm Hertz mentions Nanna, Höther, and Gewar; in *Hermann*, a drama written in 1743, Johann Elias Schlegel speaks of a cult of Tuisto; and several odes by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock refer to figures from Germanic mythology: *Braga* (1771), *Wingolf* (1747), *Wir und Sie* (Us and Them; 1766), *Skulda* (1766), and *Odin* (a hymn from *Hermanns Schlacht* [Hermann's

Battle], 1769). Hermann Lingg completed his heroic poem *Die Walküren* (The Valkyries) in 1864, and Cyrill Kistler staged his opera *Baldurs Tod* (The Death of Balder) in 1891. Ernst Toller's comedy *Der entfesselte Wotan* (Wotan Unchained) was first performed in 1893. Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll* (1848) cannot be deciphered without prior knowledge of the myth of the Wild Hunt, just as Herder's translation of the ballad *Erlkönigs Tochter* (The Erlking's Daughter) will remain mysterious to any reader who is unfamiliar with elves.

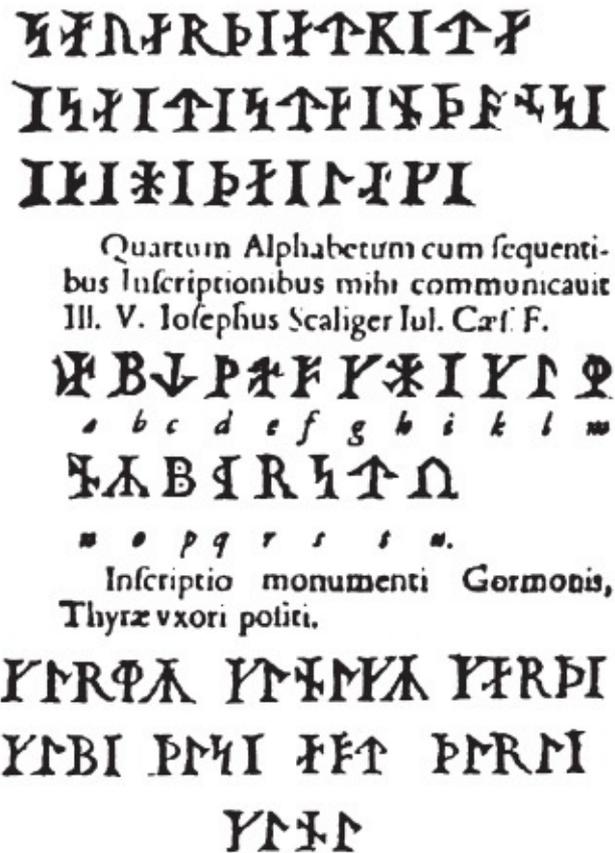


Fig. 2. Runic letters (here called the “Alphabet of the Goths”) in Vulcanio Brugensi, *De literis & lingua Getarum, siue, Gothorum*, Leiden: Franciscus Plantiniana, 1597

Germanic mythology is not confined to the Middle Ages, and therefore I have taken into account the legendary and supernatural beings that appear in what Theodor Vernaleken calls “the mythic and post-mythic legends.”

The names cited at the end of certain entries refer the reader to other ones, so as to provide a larger view of the traditions, which are unavoidably divided up in the context of a dictionary. The bibliographical notes make it possible to pursue more extensive research on these topics.

## NOTES