

MYTHOLOGIS

# Norse Mythology

*Odin, Thor, Loki, Ragnarok and the Sagas of the Vikings*

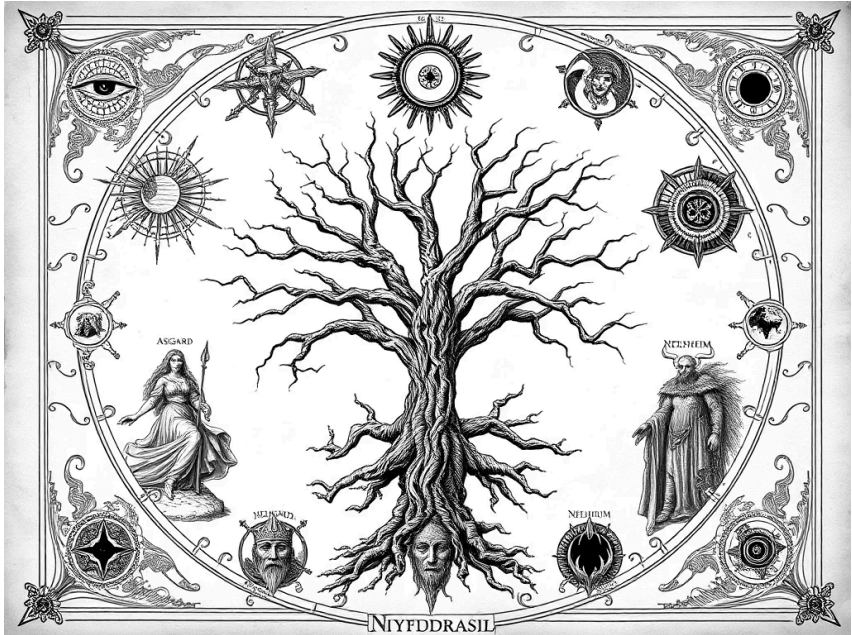
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*For the curious.*

## *Introduction*

**I** was twenty-three years old, standing watch in the North Sea on a patrol vessel whose name I am still not allowed to print, when I first read Snorri Sturluson by torchlight. The red glow was regulation: it preserves night vision when you need to go back topside. The cold was not optional. Neither was the boredom, which is the dominant fact of naval service and the thing no recruitment poster mentions. I had a paperback translation of the Prose Edda in my jacket, salt-stiff from spray, and I read it the way I had been trained to read intercepted signals: looking for pattern, for structure, for what repeats when it does not need to.

That habit never left.

I spent six years in the French Navy working in communications and data encryption. The job teaches you to see the world as a grid of signals, most of them noise, some of them load-bearing. You learn to notice when a phrase appears twice in a transmission, when a syntax breaks in a way that suggests intention rather than error. You stop assuming that randomness is random. Mythology, I discovered, works the same way. The gods repeat themselves. Their stories share bones across oceans and centuries. A man is swallowed and returns. A woman descends and the earth stops breathing. Thunder is always a hammer or an axe, never a whisper. These are not coincidences. They are structure.

When I left the service, I did not stop reading that way. I simply expanded the corpus.

This book is the result of that expansion, narrowed back down to one tradition. It is a reading of Norse mythology written for adults who want the real thing but do not have time to become Old Norse philologists. It is not a novel. I will not invent dialogue or pretend to know what Odin was thinking when he hanged himself from Yggdrasil. It is not a textbook either. I will not bury you in footnotes or expect you to memorise the twelve sons of Odin's second cousin. It is something in between: a narrative built on primary sources, written in plain language, with the understanding that you and I are both here because we take these stories seriously.

By seriously, I do not mean literally. I mean we grant them the respect of attention. We read them as the people who first told them might have read them: as maps of the world's hidden weight, as explanations for why things are the way they are, as arguments about what it means to be brave or doomed or worth remembering. The Norse gods are not simple. They lie, they break oaths, they sleep with giants and kill their own kin. They are not moral exemplars. They are something more useful: they are images of the forces that shape a life. Chaos and order. Wisdom and violence. The end that comes for everyone, and the question of what you do in the time before it arrives.

I have spent the last fifteen years reading mythology from every tradition I could access. Greek, Roman, Hindu, Maya, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Celtic, Japanese, Polynesian. I read because I am curious, and because patterns emerge when you read widely. But I keep coming back to the Norse material. Partly because it is the mythology of the cold, and I spent enough time in the cold to respect it. Partly because it is a mythology that knows it will end. The gods of Asgard do not pretend they are eternal. They know the date of their deaths. Ragnarok is not a surprise. It is an appointment. That changes everything.

Most mythologies offer you a cosmos that is stable or cyclical. The Norse offer you a cosmos that is temporary, propped up by effort, and doomed despite that effort. I find that more honest than most of what we tell ourselves.

This book leans on three primary sources, and I will name them now so you know what we are working with. The first is the Poetic Edda, a collection of Old Norse poems preserved in a thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript. The poems are older than the manuscript, some of them much older, passed down orally before they were written. They are gnomic, brutal, and often beautiful. The second source is the Prose Edda, written by Snorri Sturluson around 1220. Snorri was a Christian Icelander trying to preserve the stories of his pagan ancestors, and he did so with remarkable clarity and narrative skill. He is our single best guide to the Norse cosmos, even if we have to read him carefully. The third source is the body of skaldic poetry: praise poems, memorial verses, and kennings composed by Norse and Icelandic poets between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. They are dense, allusive, and they assume you already know the myths. We will use them to fill in gaps and verify details.

There are other sources. Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish historian writing in Latin. The sagas, which are not mythology but sometimes brush against it. Archaeological evidence, which tells us what people believed by showing us what they buried and built. I will cite those when they matter. But the Eddas and the skaldic corpus are the foundation. Everything else is commentary.

A note on what this book is not. It is not a complete catalogue. Norse mythology, like any living tradition, was messy. There are gods mentioned once and never again. There are contradictory genealogies. There are kennings that refer to stories we no longer have. I will not pretend to exhaustiveness. I will give you the core: the gods who matter, the stories that recur, the cosmology that holds it all together. If you finish this book and know who Odin is, why Thor matters, what Loki costs, and why the world ends, I will have done my job.

It is also not a book that will tell you what the Vikings believed in their hearts. We do not have access to that. We have texts written down centuries after conversion, by Christians with agendas, in a language most of us cannot read without training. We have archaeology, which is silent on metaphysics. We have comparative mythology, which helps but does not prove. I will not speculate be-

yond what the sources allow. When scholars disagree, I will say so and move on. When the texts contradict each other, I will give you both versions and let you decide. I am your guide, not your priest.

Why write this now? Because Norse mythology is everywhere at the moment, and most of what is everywhere is wrong. Not morally wrong. Factually wrong. The gods have been sanded down into superheroes or memeified into internet jokes or sold as self-help in books that claim Odin can teach you to be a better entrepreneur. None of that is mythology. It is marketing. I wrote this book because I think the real stories are better than the summaries, and because I think you deserve to read them in a form that respects both the sources and your time.

I also wrote it because I believe mythology is a skill, not a genre. It is the skill of reading old stories closely enough that they show you something new about the world you live in now. That skill is learnable. It requires no faith, no academic credentials, no special lineage. It requires only attention and a willingness to sit with strangeness until it resolves into sense. If you can do that, you can read mythology. If you can read mythology, you can see the patterns underneath the noise.

This book is structured as a voyage. We begin with the cosmology: how the world is built, where the gods live, what holds it all together. Then we meet the gods themselves, one by one, through the stories that define them. Then we follow the long shadow of Ragnarok, the end that gives the whole system its shape. Each chapter alternates between immersion and analysis. I will put you inside the myth, then step back and tell you what we know about where it comes from, how it fits, and why it might matter. The rhythm is deliberate. Mythology is not meant to be read at a distance.

One last thing. I am not Norse. I am French, raised Catholic in name and secular in fact, trained in mathematics and cryptography, and I came to this material as an outsider. That has advantages and costs. The advantage is that I have no inherited loyalty to a particular interpretation. The cost is that I lack the deep cultural fluency that comes from growing up inside a tradition. I have tried to

compensate for that cost by reading widely, citing carefully, and admitting when I do not know. If I have failed, the failure is mine. If the book succeeds, it is because the sources are good and the gods are patient with those who come to them late.

You are holding a map. Not of Norway or Iceland, though those places matter. A map of a cosmos that existed in the minds of people who lived a thousand years ago and who believed, or half-believed, or told their children to believe, that the world was a tree and the gods were doomed and the only response to that doom was to fight well and be remembered. I think they were onto something.

Turn the page. We start with the void.



*Chapter 1*

## The Viking World

**T**he longship cuts through the fjord at first light, oars rising and falling in a rhythm older than memory. Sea smoke clings to the water, thick as wool, and the carved dragon prow emerges from it like something born rather than built. The wood is salt-grey, the paint long since stripped by wind and spray. Thirty men pull in silence. Their breath clouds white. The only sounds are the creak of oarlocks, the hiss of water along the hull, and somewhere behind them, inland, the distant bark of a seal.

The scout stands at the prow, one hand on the dragon's neck. He can smell pine resin from the coast, salt from the open sea behind them, and now, faintly, something else. Smoke. Not the clean smoke of driftwood or peat, but the greasy scent of tallow and thatch. He raises his hand. The oars lift as one and hold, dripping. The ship glides forward on momentum alone.

The coast of Alba unfolds in the grey light. Low hills, dark with heather. A stone church, square and foreign, perched above a shingle beach. No wall. No lookout. The smoke rises from a cluster of buildings behind it: the monastery, fat with summer stores and the accumulated gifts of twenty years. The scout has seen three others like it this season. The monks keep no weapons. They believe their god protects them.

He lowers his hand. The oars bite water again. The ship turns toward the beach, and the men begin to check their axes, methodically, the way farmers check the edge of a scythe. One man murmurs a line under his breath, too low to hear. A prayer, perhaps. Or a boast he will make when they return home and the silver is divided and the story is told in the firelight. The dragon prow rises higher as the keel scrapes shingle. The sound is loud enough to wake the dead.

It wakes the monks instead.

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The Norse were not a single people. The word itself is a modern convenience, a label we apply to the speakers of Old Norse who lived across a geography that stretched from the Danish coast to the fjords of western Norway, from the Swedish lake districts to the wind-scoured shores of Iceland. They did not call themselves Vikings. That term, *vikingr*, referred to a specific activity: raiding, trading, or voyaging overseas, often all three at once. A man went "on viking" the way another might go fishing. It was seasonal work, and it paid better.

The period we call the Viking Age runs roughly from 793 CE, when Norwegian raiders struck the monastery at Lindisfarne, to 1066, when Harold Hardrada died at Stamford Bridge and the last great Scandinavian invasion of England ended in a field of English arrows. Those 273 years saw Norse ships reach Constantinople, Baghdad, the coasts of North America, and every navigable river in between. They settled Iceland, Greenland, Normandy, and the Scottish isles. They served as mercenaries in Byzantium, traded furs and slaves down the Volga, and carved their names into the stone lions of Piraeus. The reach was staggering, but it was never an empire. It was a network, loosely strung, held together by kinship, reputation, and the fact that a longship could go almost anywhere if the wind was right.

Geographically, the heartland was threefold. Norway provided the sailors: men who grew up in a landscape where the sea was the only highway and the fjords cut so deep into the mountains that overland travel was a fool's errand. Denmark controlled the southern trade routes and the rich agricultural land that

made it the wealthiest of the Scandinavian kingdoms. Sweden looked east, down the rivers that led to the Byzantine and Islamic worlds, and the Swedes, or Rus as they were called in the east, built trading posts that would become Novgorod and Kiev. Iceland, settled in the late ninth century by Norwegian exiles and adventurers, became the great repository of the myths. It was there, in the thirteenth century, that Snorri Sturluson wrote the Prose Edda, our single most coherent guide to the gods.

The religion was not separate from daily life. It had no churches, no priesthood in the Christian sense, no holy book. Worship happened at home, at grave mounds, at springs and groves that had been sacred for longer than anyone could remember. A farmer might sacrifice a horse to Freyr for a good harvest. A king might dedicate a battle to Odin and hang the captured weapons in a sacred tree. The gods were not distant. They were participants, and they expected results. *Hávamál*, the collection of gnomic wisdom attributed to Odin himself, makes this transactional quality plain: "A gift always looks for a return." The Norse did not worship out of love. They worshipped because it worked, or because their fathers had, or because the alternative was to stand alone in a world that did not care whether you lived or died.

The thing the rest of Europe got wrong, and continued to get wrong for a thousand years, was that the Norse were savages. They were literate. They carved runes, kept complex legal codes, and composed poetry that required three years of training to perform properly. The sagas, written down in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, preserve a narrative tradition that valued memory, precision, and the ability to trace a genealogy back six generations without hesitation. A man's reputation was his currency, and it survived him. Snorri Sturluson, writing in his Prose Edda around 1220, was not recording folklore. He was preserving a canon, and he knew it. His work is framed as a manual for poets, a guide to the kennings and mythological references that any educated Icelander was expected to recognise. When he writes of Odin hanging on

Yggdrasil, or Thor fishing for the Midgard Serpent, he assumes his reader already knows the story. He is teaching them how to tell it properly.

Adam of Bremen, writing in the 1070s, provides one of the earliest external descriptions of Norse religion. His account of the temple at Uppsala in Sweden is lurid and second-hand, but it captures the unease of a Christian observer confronting a system that made no sense to him. He describes a great tree, evergreen, standing beside the temple, and a well into which living men were sacrificed. Whether Adam ever saw Uppsala himself is unclear. His sources were Danish converts, and they had reasons to exaggerate. But the detail about the tree is worth noting. Sacred trees appear again and again in Norse sources: in the sagas, in place names, in the cosmology itself. Yggdrasil, the world tree, is not a metaphor. It is the structure on which everything else depends.

Saxo Grammaticus, writing his *Gesta Danorum* in the early thirteenth century, gives us another angle. Saxo was a Christian Dane, and he had no love for the old gods, but he preserves stories that would otherwise be lost. His history is half myth, half propaganda, and wholly useful. He tells us that the Danes once worshipped Odin under the name Othinus, that they believed him to be a great king who became a god after death, and that his cult involved human sacrifice. Saxo disapproves, but he reports. That tension, between the convert's disgust and the historian's duty, makes his work readable in a way that pure hagiography is not.

Archaeological evidence fills in what the texts leave out. The ship burials at Oseberg and Gokstad in Norway show us what wealth looked like: carved sleighs, woven tapestries, the bodies of women buried with everything they would need in the next world. The runestones of Sweden and Denmark record journeys, battles, and the names of the dead. A stone at Gripsholm commemorates a man who "died in the east in Gardariki," which is to say Russia. Another, at Jelling, marks the conversion of Denmark to Christianity under Harald Bluetooth. The stone is a hinge: on one side, the old gods; on the other, the cross. Both are carved into the same rock.

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Inside the monastery, a young monk is copying a psalter when the door breaks open. The light from the doorway is grey and cold, and the men who enter are darker shapes against it. He does not stand. His hand, still holding the quill, begins to shake, and a line of ink runs down the margin of the page, ruining a week's work. One of the raiders says something in a language the monk does not recognise. Another laughs.

They are not giants. That is the first thing the monk notices. They are men, no taller than his brothers, though broader in the shoulder and better fed. Their clothes are wool and leather, salt-stained and practical. One wears a silver arm-ring that catches the light. Another has a scar that runs from his temple to his jaw, white against sunburned skin. They move through the room quickly, efficiently, taking the candlesticks, the chalice, the small reliquary that holds a fragment of bone the abbot swore was Saint Columba's.

The monk does not resist. Resistance, the abbot has always said, is a sin when it serves only pride. He watches as they strip the altar, as they pry the silver fittings from the gospel book, as they argue briefly over whether the book itself is worth carrying. One of them flips through the pages, frowning at the Latin script. He shakes his head. The book is dropped, and the pages splay open on the stone floor.

Outside, the other monks are being herded onto the beach. The abbot is speaking, his voice high and fast, trying to explain something in a language the raiders do not understand. One of them cuffs him, not hard, just enough to make him stop talking. The ship is being loaded. Sacks of barley, a barrel of salted fish, a bronze cauldron that took four men to carry down from the storehouse. And silver. Always silver. Coins, plate, anything that can be melted down or traded. The raiders work in silence now, and the monks stand in a line and watch their life's work carried away one armload at a time.

When the ship is loaded, the raiders push it back into the water. The oars come out. The dragon prow turns toward the open sea. One of the monks begins to pray aloud, and another joins him, and then they are all praying, their

voices thin against the wind. The raiders do not look back. By the time the sun is fully up, the ship is a dark line on the horizon, and then it is gone.

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The question of why they sailed has three answers, depending on who you ask. The sagas say they sailed for reputation. A man who stayed home was a farmer. A man who went overseas and returned with silver and stories was a man worth listening to. The Arab chronicler Ibn Fadlan, who met Swedish traders on the Volga in 922, says they sailed for profit. He describes them as the filthiest people he has ever seen, and also the most commercially astute, carrying cargoes of furs, amber, and slaves down rivers that linked the Baltic to the Caspian. The third answer, the one that medieval Christian chroniclers preferred, is that they sailed because they were pagans and pagans are violent by nature. This is the least useful answer, but it was repeated so often that it became the only answer most of Europe remembered.

Trade and raid were not opposites. A ship that carried furs to Constantinople might raid a coastal village on the way home if the opportunity presented itself. The line between merchant and pirate was drawn by circumstance, not principle. The Danelaw, the region of England where Norse settlers established their own laws and customs in the ninth century, began with invasion and ended with integration. Within two generations, Norse farmers were marrying English women, their children were speaking a hybrid language, and the distinction between conqueror and neighbour had blurred past recognition. York, once Eoforwic, became Jorvik, a thriving trade hub where Irish silver, Frankish glass, and Baltic amber changed hands in a market that ran six days a week.

Settlement was the third motive, and in some ways the most durable. Iceland was uninhabited when the Norse arrived in the 870s, and they filled it with a society that had no king, no central authority, and a legal system based on public assembly and the memorisation of law. The Althing, established in 930, is one of the oldest parliaments in the world. Greenland, settled by Erik the Red in the

980s after he was exiled from Iceland for murder, supported Norse farms for nearly five centuries before the climate turned and the colony vanished. Vinland, the name given to the Norse settlement in North America around the year 1000, lasted only a few years. The sagas say the settlers were driven out by the native people, whom they called skraelings. Archaeology confirms the sagas. The site at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland shows clear evidence of Norse occupation: a smithy, a boat repair station, and then nothing. They came, they tried, they left.

The religion travelled with them. When a Norwegian farmer settled in Iceland, he brought his high-seat pillars, the carved wooden posts that framed the seat of honour in his hall, and he threw them overboard as he approached the coast. Where they washed ashore, he built his farm. The pillars were sacred, and the land they chose was sacred by extension. This was not superstition. It was legal procedure. The *Landnámabók*, the Book of Settlements, records hundreds of these claims, and it treats the gods as witnesses. A man named Thorolf, arriving in Iceland, is said to have dedicated his land to Thor and named it Thorsness. No one could relieve themselves on that land, because it was holy. Violators were killed or exiled. The sagas report this without irony.

*Hávamál*, the poem of Odinic wisdom preserved in the Poetic Edda, gives us the clearest picture of how the Norse thought about the gods and their place in the world. It is a collection of proverbs, some practical, some gnomic, all attributed to Odin. "Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die; I know one thing that never dies: the reputation of each dead man." This is not theology. It is a survival manual. The gods are powerful, but they are not eternal. Ragnarok, the end of the world, will kill them too. What survives is memory, and memory is made by deeds. A man who dies well, who is remembered in verse, has beaten death in the only way that matters.

I find it striking that the Norse, who believed the world would end in fire and flood and the death of every god they worshipped, still bothered to plant crops and raise children and compose poetry. There is a stubbornness in that, a

refusal to let the future dictate the present. The gods themselves show the same quality. Odin knows he will die at Ragnarok, swallowed by the wolf Fenrir, and he spends the entire mythology preparing for it anyway. He gathers the slain warriors in Valhalla, he seeks wisdom at any cost, and he does not stop. The Norse did not worship hope. They worshipped effort.

Christianity arrived slowly, and it arrived differently in different places. Norway was converted by force under Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Iceland converted by vote at the Althing in the year 1000, a decision made not out of conviction but out of pragmatism: civil war was bad for business, and the Christian kings of Norway were threatening to cut off trade. The old religion did not vanish overnight. For a century or more, Icelanders were baptised Christians who still named their sons Thor and their daughters Freydis, who still swore oaths on rings sacred to the gods, and who still told the old stories by firelight. Snorri Sturluson, writing two centuries after conversion, was a Christian, but he wrote about the gods as if they mattered. Perhaps they still did.

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The longship returns three weeks later, riding low in the water. The men are tired, and two of them are missing, left behind in a skirmish on the Irish coast that no one wants to talk about. The silver is divided on the beach, each man's share weighed and counted in front of witnesses. There is no argument. A man who cheats his crew does not get a crew the next season.

The scout, the one who stood at the prow in the sea smoke, takes his share and walks up the hill to his farm. His wife is waiting, and his children, and the work that has piled up in his absence: a fence to mend, a roof to patch, barley to thresh. He will do it all, and he will do it well, because a man is judged by what he leaves behind. The silver will buy an arm-ring, or a new loom for his wife, or a sword for his eldest son when the boy is old enough to use it.

That night, by the fire, he tells the story. Not the whole story. Not the part where the monks prayed, or the part where his friend took an axe to the skull and

died in the surf. He tells the part where the dragon prow cut through the mist, where the coast of Alba rose out of the grey, where the ship turned toward the beach and the men checked their axes and no one spoke because there was nothing left to say. His children listen, wide-eyed. His wife listens, her hands busy with wool. The fire crackles. Outside, the wind is rising, and somewhere in the dark, the sea is still there, cold and salt and patient.

The gods are still there too, in the names of the days, in the oaths men swear, in the stories that will not die. They are there in the shape of the year, in the sacrifices at midwinter, in the memory of a time when the world was young and the gods walked among men and nothing was settled yet. The dragon prow, salt-grey and silent, rests on the beach below the farm. It will sail again in the spring.



## *Chapter 2*

# **Yggdrasil and the Nine Worlds**

**T**he roots are older than the ground they rest in. That is the first thing you notice when you stand at the base of Yggdrasil, though standing is the wrong word for what happens here. You do not approach the world tree. You discover that you have always been beneath it, that every direction you have ever walked has been a slow circling of its trunk. The bark is ash-grey, ridged deep enough to hide a man's hand. Frost clings to the northern side, even in summer. The smell is green water and old wood and something else, something that has no name because it existed before names were invented.

Look up. The branches divide the sky into nine pieces, and each piece is a world. Tilt your head and Asgard appears, golden-roofed and distant, perched where the light is cleanest. Tilt again and you see Midgard, the middle enclosure, the ring of human earth surrounded by ocean and the serpent that holds its own tail in its jaws. The other worlds flicker in and out of sight depending on the angle of your gaze, on the season, on whether you are the sort of person who can see such things at all. Some people spend their whole lives beneath the tree and never see more than branches.

The roots go down in three directions. One runs toward a well so old that the Norns, the three women who carve fate into wood, sit beside it and water the tree with what they draw up. The water is white, thick as clay, and where it

touches the bark the wood stays alive. Another root reaches toward a spring where a severed head speaks prophecy and the price of a drink is an eye. The third root goes down into the dark, into the realm of ice and poison, where a dragon chews at the wood and has been chewing since the beginning. The tree does not die. It is dying, and it does not die, and that is the point.

A squirrel runs up the trunk, claws scrabbling on bark. It is carrying a message from the dragon to the eagle that roosts in the highest branches, and the message is an insult, and the eagle will send an insult back, and this has been happening for so long that neither the dragon nor the eagle remembers what they are angry about. The squirrel does not care. It runs because that is what it does. The tree stands because that is what it does. You stand at the base, neck craned, trying to see all nine worlds at once, and you cannot, and that is what you do.

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Yggdrasil is not a symbol. It is the structure. The Old Norse cosmos does not rest on the back of a turtle or float in an ocean of milk. It grows, branches and roots, and everything that exists does so in relation to the tree. The name itself tells you this: Yggdrasil, the horse of Ygg, and Ygg is one of Odin's many names. The horse is the gallows, and the gallows is the tree, and Odin hangs from it for nine nights to learn the runes. The world tree is also a gibbet. The Norse did not separate the sacred from the grim.

Our primary sources for Yggdrasil are two: the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, preserved in the Poetic Edda, and Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, written in Iceland around 1220. *Grímnismál* is the older text, likely composed in the tenth or eleventh century, and it takes the form of a monologue delivered by Odin in disguise. He is tortured, starved, seated between two fires, and he responds by reciting the structure of the cosmos in methodical detail. Stanza 29 names the tree: "Ash Yggdrasil suffers hardship, more than men know. A stag bites from above, the sides rot, and Nidhogg gnaws from below." The tree is under attack from every direction, and it endures. This is not a metaphor for resilience. It is a statement of fact.

Snorri, writing three centuries after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, treats the tree as the spine of his mythological system. In the *Gylfaginning*, the first section of his *Prose Edda*, he describes *Yggdrasil* as the greatest and holiest of all trees, its branches spreading over all the worlds, its crown reaching past the sky. He names three roots. One extends to the *Aesir*, the gods of *Asgard*. Another reaches the frost giants in *Jotunheim*. The third goes down to *Niflheim*, the realm of ice and mist that existed before creation. Beneath each root is a well or spring. Beneath the root in *Asgard* lies the Well of *Urd*, where the *Norns* dwell. Beneath the root in *Jotunheim* is *Mimir's Well*, whose water grants wisdom. Beneath the root in *Niflheim* is *Hvergelmir*, the roaring cauldron, source of all rivers and home to the dragon *Nidhogg*.

The wells matter as much as the tree. *Urd's* well is tended by three women whose names are *Urd*, *Verdandi*, and *Skuld*: past, present, and future, though the Norse did not think of time in quite that way. The *Norns* carve runes into wood, and what they carve becomes fate. Every day they draw water from the well and mix it with the mud that lies beside it, and they pour this mixture over the tree's roots. Snorri says the water is so holy that everything it touches becomes white as the membrane inside an eggshell. The tree is kept alive by the deliberate effort of three women who know how it will end and tend it anyway.

*Mimir's Well* is different. The water there is not holy. It is knowledge, and knowledge has a price. *Odin* trades his eye for a single drink, and what he learns is never fully spelled out, but it is enough to make him the wisest of the gods and the most haunted. The *Völuspá*, the eddic poem that recounts the creation and destruction of the world, refers to *Mimir's* head, severed and preserved, speaking counsel to *Odin* in the days before *Ragnarok*. Whether the head in the well and the head that speaks are the same head is unclear. The sources do not agree, and Snorri does not press the point. What is clear is that wisdom in the Norse cosmos is not freely given. It is bought, and the currency is loss.

*Hvergelmir*, the third well, is the source of venom and ice. The rivers that flow from it are named in *Grímnismál*, and the names are blunt: *Svol*, *Gunnthra*,

Fjorm, Fimbulthul, Slidr, Hrid. Slidr, Snorri notes, is full of knives. These are not rivers you sail. They are the cold that seeps into the world from below, the boundary between what lives and what does not. Nidhogg, the dragon, gnaws at the root above Hvergelmir, and he also chews the corpses of the dishonoured dead. *Völuspá* describes him rising at Ragnarok, wings heavy with bodies, and then the poem ends. The dragon does not die. He simply continues.

The creatures of the tree form a small, bitter ecosystem. Nidhogg gnaws from below. An unnamed eagle roosts at the top, and between its eyes sits a hawk named *Vedrfolnir*, whose purpose is never explained. A stag named *Dain* and three others, *Dvalin*, *Duneyr*, and *Durathror*, eat the tree's leaves and bark. And *Ratatoskr*, the squirrel, runs up and down the trunk carrying insults between the dragon and the eagle. Snorri reports this without commentary, as if the fact that the cosmic axis is also a site of endless petty spite requires no explanation. Perhaps it does not. The gods quarrel. The tree rots. The Norns water the roots. Everything continues until it does not.

The nine worlds are not stacked like floors in a building. They are distributed through the tree's structure in a way that resists mapping. *Asgard*, the realm of the *Aesir*, sits high in the branches, connected to *Midgard* by the rainbow bridge *Bifrost*. *Midgard*, the world of humans, is the middle enclosure, ringed by ocean and the *Midgard Serpent*. *Jotunheim*, land of the giants, lies to the east, though east is a direction that shifts depending on where you are standing. *Vanaheim*, home of the *Vanir*, the other tribe of gods, is mentioned in passing but never described. *Alfheim*, realm of the light elves, is given to the god *Freyr* as a tooth-gift, a present given to a child when their first tooth comes in. *Svartalfheim*, home of the dark elves, and *Nidavellir*, the realm of dwarves, are sometimes treated as the same place and sometimes not. *Niflheim* is ice and mist, the oldest of the worlds. *Muspelheim* is fire, guarded by the giant *Surt*, who will burn everything at Ragnarok.

The cosmology is not systematic. Snorri tries to organize it, but the poems resist organization. *Grímnismál* lists the worlds, but the list does not match the list

in *Völuspá*, and neither matches the passing references in other eddic poems. This is not a failure of memory. It is a feature of oral tradition. The worlds are named when the story requires them, and the story does not require a map.

I find it telling that the Norse cosmos has no centre in the way the Greek cosmos does. Olympus is a mountain you can point to. Delphi is the navel of the world, marked with a stone. Yggdrasil is everywhere and nowhere. You are always beneath it, and you can never find it, and both of those things are true at the same time. The tree is the world, and the world is the tree, and the distinction is a Christian habit of thought that the Norse did not share.

Comparison with other cosmologies sharpens the picture. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish* describes the world as the corpse of the goddess Tiamat, split in half by Marduk, her body becoming sky and earth. The Greek cosmos is a series of nested spheres: earth, sea, sky, and beyond the sky the realm of the gods, stable and eternal. The Norse cosmos is a tree that is rotting and being tended and rotting again, inhabited by gods who know they will die and giants who are waiting for the chance to kill them. There is no eternal realm. There is no safety. There is only the tree, and the tree suffers hardship, more than men know.

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A woman kneels beside the Well of Urd, her hands white with clay. She is old, though old is the wrong word. She was never young. She has always been this: grey-haired, sharp-eyed, her fingers tracing shapes into the wet wood of a root that rises from the water like a whale's back. The shapes are runes, and the runes are names, and the names are lives. She carves quickly, without hesitation, because hesitation is a luxury and she has work to do.

Beside her sit two others. One is younger, or seems younger, her hair still dark, her hands steady. The other is a child, or seems a child, though her eyes are older than the tree. They do not speak. They have said everything there is to say, and they said it so long ago that the words have worn smooth. The child dips a wooden bowl into the well and lifts it, careful not to spill. The water is thick and white, and it steams in the cold air.