

PANTHEON FAIRY TALE AND FOLKLORE LIBRARY

THE Norse Myths



INTRODUCED AND RETOLD BY

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I *The Creation*



BURNING ICE, BITING FLAME; that is how life began.

In the south is a realm called Muspell. That region flickers with dancing flames. It seethes and it shines. No one can endure it except those born into it. Black Surt is there; he sits on the furthest reach of that land, brandishing a flaming sword; he is already waiting for the end when he will rise and savage the gods and whelm the whole world with fire.

In the north is a realm called Niflheim. It is packed with ice and covered with vast sweeps of snow. In the heart of that region lies the spring Hvergelmir and that is the source of eleven rivers named the Elivagar: they are cool Svól and Gunnthra the defiant, Fjorm and bubbling Fimbulthul, fearsome Slid and storming Hrid, Sylg, Ylg, broad Vid and Leipt which streaks like lightning, and freezing Gjoll.

Between these realms there once stretched a huge and seeming emptiness; this was Ginnungagap. The rivers that sprang from Hvergelmir streamed into the void. The yeasty venom in them thickened and congealed like slag, and the rivers turned into ice. That venom also spat out drizzle – an unending dismal hagger that, as soon as it settled, turned into rime. So it went on until all the northern part of Ginnungagap was heavy with layers of ice and hoar frost, a desolate place haunted by gusts and skuthers of wind.

Just as the northern part was frozen, the southern was molten and glowing, but the middle of Ginnungagap was as mild as hanging air on a summer evening. There, the warm breath drifting north from Muspell met the rime from Niflheim; it touched it and played over it, and the ice began to thaw and drip. Life quickened in those drops, and they took the form of a giant. He was called Ymir.

Ymir was a frost giant; he was evil from the first. While he slept, he began to sweat. A man and woman grew out of the ooze under his left armpit, and one of his legs fathered a son on the other leg. Ymir was the forefather of all the frost giants, and they called him Aurgelmir.

As more of the ice in Ginnungagap melted, the fluid took the form of a cow. She was called Audumla. Ymir fed off the four rivers of milk that

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coursed from her teats, and Audumla fed off the ice itself. She licked the salty blocks and by the evening of the first day a man's hair had come out of the ice. Audumla licked more and by the evening of the second day a man's head had come. Audumla licked again and by the evening of the third day the whole man had come. His name was Buri.

Buri was tall and strong and good-looking. In time he had a son called Bor and Bor married a daughter of Bolthor, one of the frost giants. Her name was Bestla and she mothered three children, all of them sons. The first was Odin, the second was Vili, and the third was Ve.

All this was in the beginning, before there were waves of sand, the sea's cool waves, waving grass. There was no earth and no heaven above; only Muspell and Niflheim and, between them, Ginnungagap.

The three sons of Bor had no liking for Ymir and the growing gang of unruly, brutal frost giants; as time went on, they grew to hate them. At last they attacked Ymir and killed him. His wounds were like springs; so much blood streamed from them, and so fast, that the flood drowned all the frost giants except Bergelmir and his wife. They embarked in their boat – it was made out of a hollowed tree trunk – and rode on a tide of gore.

Odin and Vili and Ve hoisted the body of the dead frost giant on to their shoulders and carted it to the middle of Ginnungagap. That is where they made the world from his body. They shaped the earth from Ymir's flesh and the mountains from his unbroken bones; from his teeth and jaws and the fragments of his shattered bones they made rocks and boulders and stones.

Odin and Vili and Ve used the welter of blood to make landlocked lakes and to make the sea. After they had formed the earth, they laid the rocking ocean in a ring right round it. And it is so wide that most men would dismiss the very idea of crossing it.

Then the three brothers raised Ymir's skull and made the sky from it and placed it so that its four corners reached to the ends of the earth. They set a dwarf under each corner, and their names are East and West and North and South. Then Odin and Vili and Ve seized on the sparks and glowing embers from Muspell and called them sun and moon and stars; they put them high in Ginnungagap to light heaven above and earth below. In this way the brothers gave each star its proper place; some were fixed in the sky, others were free to follow the paths appointed for them.

The earth was round and lay within the ring of the deep sea. Along the strand the sons of Bor marked out tracts of land and gave them to the frost giants and the rock giants; and there, in Jotunheim, the giants

settled and remained. They were so hostile that the three brothers built an enclosure further inland around a vast area of the earth. They shaped it out of Ymir's eyebrows, and called it Midgard. The sun warmed the stones in the earth there, and the ground was green with sprouting leeks. The sons of Bor used Ymir's brains as well; they flung them up into the air and turned them into every kind of cloud.

One day, Odin and Vili and Ve were striding along the frayed edge of the land, where the earth meets the sea. They came across two fallen trees with their roots ripped out of the ground; one was an ash, the other an elm. Then the sons of Bor raised them and made from them the first man and woman. Odin breathed into them the spirit of life; Vili offered them sharp wits and feeling hearts; and Ve gave them the gifts of hearing and sight. The man was called Ask and the woman Embla and they were given Midgard to live in. All the families and nations and races of men are descended from them.

One of the giants living in Jotunheim, Narvi, had a daughter called Night who was as dark eyed, dark haired and swarthy as the rest of her family. She married three times. Her first husband was a man called Naglfari and their son was Aud; her second husband was Annar and their daughter was Earth; and her third husband was shining Delling who was related to the sons of Bor. Their son was Day and, like all his father's side of the family, Day was radiant and fair of face.

Then Odin took Night and her son Day, sat them in horse-drawn chariots, and set them in the sky to ride round the world every two half-days. Night leads the way and her horse is frosty-maned Hrimfaxi. Day's horse is Skinfaxi; he has a gleaming mane that lights up sky and earth alike.

A man called Mundilfari living in Midgard had two children and they were so beautiful that he called his son Moon and his daughter Sun; Sun married a man called Glen. Odin and his brothers and their offspring, the Aesir, were angered at such daring. They snatched away both children and placed them in the sky to guide the chariots of the sun and moon – the constellations made by the sons of Bor to light the world out of the sparks from Muspell.

Moon leads the way. He guides the moon on its path and decides when he will wax and wane. He does not travel alone, as you can see if you look into the sky; for Moon in turn plucked two children from Midgard, Bil and Hjuki, whose father is Vidfinn. They were just walking away from the well Byrgir, carrying between them the water cask Soeg on the pole Simul, when Moon swooped down and carried them off.

* The sun will be named after the last lines.

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Sun follows behind. One of her horses is called Arvak because he rises so early, and the other Alsvid because he is immensely strong. The Aesir inserted iron-cold bellows under their shoulder-blades to keep them cool. Sun always seems to be in a great hurry, and that is because she is chased by Skoll, the wolf who is always snapping and growling close behind her. In the end he will catch her. And the wolf that races in front of Sun is called Hati; he is after Moon and will run him down in the end. Both wolves are the sons of an aged giantess who lived in Iron Wood, east of Midgard.

After the sons of Bor had made the first man and woman, and set Night and Day, Moon and Sun in the sky, they remembered the maggots that had squirmed and swarmed in Ymir's flesh and crawled out over the earth. Then they gave them wits and the shape of men, but they live under the hills and mountains in rocky chambers and grottoes and caverns. These man-like maggots are called dwarfs. Modsognir is their leader and his deputy is Durin.

So the earth was fashioned and filled with men and giants and dwarfs, surrounded by the sea and covered by the sky. Then the sons of Bor built their own realm of Asgard – a mighty stronghold, a place of green plains and shining palaces high over Midgard. The two regions were linked by Bifrost, a flaming rainbow bridge; it was made of three colours with magic and great skill, and it is wonderfully strong. All the Aesir, the guardians of men, crossed over and settled in Asgard. Odin, Allfather, is the oldest and greatest of them all; there are twelve divine gods and twelve divine goddesses, and a great assembly of other Aesir. And this was the beginning of all that has happened, remembered or forgotten, in the regions of the world.

And all that has happened, and all the regions of the world, lie under the branches of the ash Yggdrasill, greatest and best of trees. It soars over all that is; its three roots delve into Asgard and Jotunheim and Niflheim, and there is a spring under each. A hawk and eagle sit in it, a squirrel scurries up and down it, deer leap within it and nibble at it, a dragon devours it, and it is sprinkled with dew. It gives life to itself, it gives life to the unborn. The winds whirl round it and Yggdrasill croons or groans. Yggdrasill always was and is and will be.