

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

THOR

VIKING GOD OF THUNDER

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INTRODUCTION

Thor is the best known of the Norse gods. From archeological evidence, he also seems to have been the god favored most by the Vikings themselves. The Vikings identified with Thor in a way they did not with the unpredictable Odin, the unyielding Tyr, and the dangerous Loki.

Thor's popularity can be explained in several ways. As a god of storms and thunder, he would naturally have been important to a society of seafarers, fishermen, and farmers. Literary sources depict Thor as a Viking writ large – strong, bluff, hearty, and fearless – so he may have been something of a role model. He is also fallible: this may be because his adventures were first written down at a time when paganism had given way to Christianity in most of Scandinavia, and contemporary retellings of Norse myths were purged of religious content. This turned them into wild adventure tales and reduced the gods to something like modern superheroes.

Perhaps this is one reason why Thor still makes regular appearances in contemporary culture. Since 1962 he has been one of Marvel Comics' more popular superheroes, appearing in films and television shows as well as in comics. Thor remains a popular boys' name in Scandinavia, and has also been attached to Norwegian and German warships, an American ballistic missile and booster rocket, a British ramjet, and more than one heavy metal act, among other things.

Thor's most popular symbol, the hammer Mjolnir, has been adopted in recent decades by a variety of groups ranging from neopagans to rockers and bikers. In recent years its use has been reported among white supremacists. The swastika, infamously co-opted by the Nazi Party in 1920 and used by racist groups ever since, was also originally associated with Thor. It has been variously interpreted as a stylized thunderbolt or a symbol for Thor's hammer.

This book examines Thor's journey from god to prototypical superhero, and recounts some of the most popular tales told about the Viking god of thunder.

(Opposite) Thor's Fight with the Giants (1872) by Marten Eskil Winge is a typical 19th-century image of the Thunder God. © National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden / The Bridgeman Art Library)

A NOTE ABOUT SPELLINGS

The primary sources for these tales are not consistent about the spelling of many names. In addition, the Old Norse language features a few letters that are not part of our Roman alphabet, and uses accents above many

vowels. The result can be confusing and hard for a modern English-speaker to read. Therefore, character names and poem titles have been simplified in this book for the sake of consistency and readability.

The World of Norse Myth

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

The Aesir

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Nine Worlds

The Nine Worlds of Norse cosmology were arranged around the world-tree Yggdrasil in three layers.

At the top were Asgard, Vanaheim, and Alfheim; in the middle were Midgard, Jotunheim, Svartalfheim and Nidavellir; and beneath Yggdrasil's roots lay Niflheim and Muspellsheim.

Asgard was the realm of the Aesir, the tribe to which most of the Norse gods belonged. Between Asgard and Midgard stretched Bifrost, the rainbow bridge, guarded by Heimdall against the day when the giants would invade and Ragnarok would begin.

Vanaheim was the home of the Vanir, a second tribe of deities. Apart from Frey, Freyja, and Njord, who lived among the Aesir, the Vanir are obscure. Some scholars suggest that they were the folk-memory of an earlier religion based on the land and fertility.

Alfheim was the land of the Elves (*alfar*). Frey may have had a hall there, or he may have owned a hall called Alfheim, which was situated in Asgard – the myths are unclear.

Midgard was the land of humans. Midgard was encircled by a deep ocean, at the bottom of which lay Jormungand the Midgard Serpent, encircling the world with its tail in its mouth.

Jotunheim was the land of the giants, where many of Thor's adventures take place. It seems to have been much like Midgard.

Svartalfheim was the land of the Dark Elves. Little is said of them in Norse myth, although some scholars equate them with dwarves and claim that Svartalfheim and Nidavellir were two names for the same place.

Nidavellir was the home of the Dwarves. Little else is said of it.

Niflheim was a land of mist and darkness. Ruled by Loki's daughter Hel, it was a land of the dead, inhabited by those who died of disease or old age. Some sources call it Hel after its ruler; others imply that Hel was a separate realm within Niflheim.

Muspellsheim was the land of the fire giants. It was said to be a realm of fire, so hot that no one who was not born there could survive it.

Most of the surviving tales of Thor's adventures are set in Asgard, Midgard, and Jotunheim.

THOR THE LEGEND

Christianity established itself in the Viking homelands of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland during the 10th to 13th centuries. The Norse religion was slow to die, especially in remote rural areas, but as elsewhere in Europe, Christianity eventually took over and the older religion was reduced to a collection of rural customs and folklore. But this was not to be the end for Thor and the other Norse gods. In the 13th century, two writers, Saemund Sigfusson and Snorri Sturluson, laid the foundation for almost everything we know today about Norse mythology in the *Eddas*.

Over the centuries that followed, the material in their work has been expanded and adapted for a variety of reasons, until today Thor is a major figure in superhero comics, extremist politics, and revived Norse paganism.

The figure of Thor in the surviving legends is larger than life. He is short-tempered and capable of astounding feats of strength, and his favorite pastime is slaying giants. His approach to any problem is direct and usually violent, except for one story in which he outwits a cunning dwarf to save his daughter. On more than one occasion Loki and other enemies make him look almost foolish, but his strength and fighting prowess see him through every hazard except for his final, fatal battle with the world-encircling Midgard Serpent.

Given these qualities, it is perhaps no surprise that Thor's most visible presence in popular culture is in the guise of a comic-book superhero. In some ways, it could be argued that the Christianized legends of the *Eddas* were the precursors of today's superhero comics.

THORSDRAPA

Thorsdrapa (*The Lay of Thor*) is one of the few sources for Norse myth that predate the *Eddas*. It was composed by 10th-century skaldic poet Eilifr Godrunarson, who served at the court of Norwegian Jarl Haakon Sigurdsson (also called Haakon the Powerful). Although never crowned king, Haakon was the *de facto* ruler of Norway from about 975 to 995.

The poem is hard to read because of its extensive use of *kennings* and other complex language. The main part of the poem tells of Thor's exploits against the giant Geirrod, starting with one of Loki's typical pranks and ending, predictably, with Thor slaughtering giants right and left. The *Thorsdrapa* seems to have been the main source for the poet Snorri Sturluson's retelling.

The Eddas

Most of our information on Norse mythology comes from two books, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. Both were written in Iceland during the 13th century, drawing on earlier sources.

Iceland had adopted Christianity in the year 1000, so the myths were retold without any religious content. Reading between the lines, it is possible to see Thor as a role model for the pagan Vikings who worshiped him: the stories emphasize his strength and fighting prowess, which are put to good use in protecting Asgard from encroaching giants.

The Poetic Edda

Attributed to Saemund Sigfusson, the *Poetic Edda* (also known as the *Verse Edda*) comes mainly from a 13th-century manuscript named the *Codex Regius* or *Konungsbok* ("book of kings"), which was rediscovered in 1662. It consists of 32 sections, of which nine contain references to Thor.

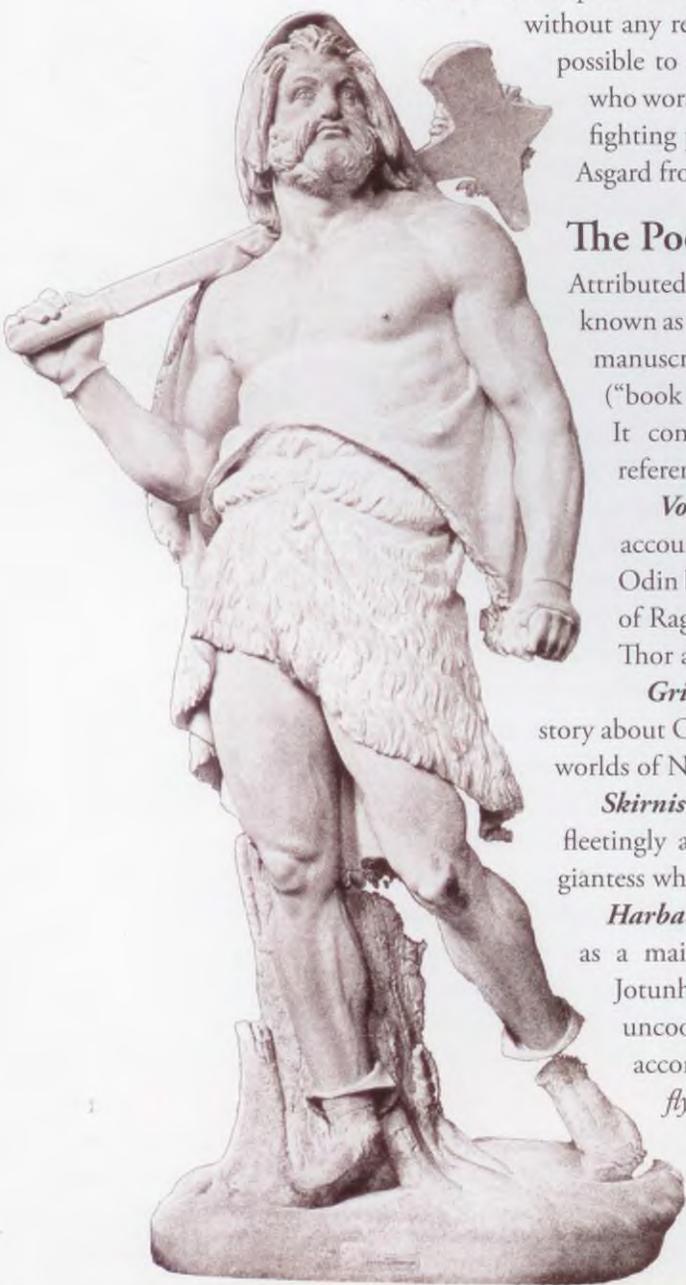
Voluspá ("The Prophecy of the Seeress") is an account of the world's beginning and end, as told to Odin by a *volva* or seeress. It includes a detailed account of Ragnarok, the war at the end of the world in which Thor and the other gods are destined to be killed.

Grimnismál ("The Sayings of Grimnir") is mainly a story about Odin, but includes an account of the gods and the worlds of Norse myth.

Skirnismál ("The Sayings of Skirnir") mentions Thor fleetingly as one of the gods who will be angered with a giantess who rejects the advances of a lovesick Frey.

Harbardsljóð ("The Lay of Harbard") features Thor as a main character. While returning to Asgard from Jotunheim, the land of the giants, Thor encounters an uncooperative ferryman (who may be Odin in disguise, according to some scholars) and the two engage in a *flyting* match, an exchange of poetic insults. Several of Thor's exploits are mentioned in the course of the argument.

Hymiskvida ("Hymir's Poem") sees Thor visiting the giant Hymir to borrow a cauldron large enough to heat mead for all the gods at once. Along the way Thor performs several feats of strength, kills a number of giants, and almost catches the world-encircling Midgard Serpent while fishing.



Thor (1844), a marble statue by B. E. Fogelberg. (Ivy Close Images / Alamy)

Lokasenna (“Loki’s Quarrel”) tells of a feast at which the trickster god Loki insults all of the gods, and only agrees to leave after Thor threatens to knock his head off with his great hammer Mjolnir.

Thrymskvida (“The Tale of Thrym”) tells how the giant Thrym steals Thor’s hammer and refuses to return it unless he is allowed to marry the goddess Freyja. Thor and Loki go to Thrym’s hall disguised as a bride and bridesmaid; when the hammer is laid in the bride’s lap as part of the wedding ceremony, Thor kills the giants with it.

Alvismal (“The Talk of Alvis”) is a dialogue between Thor and a dwarf named Alvis (“all-wise”) who comes to claim Thor’s daughter as his bride. Thor refuses since he was not consulted about the match, and the rest of the poem is a contest of questions and answers between the two, mainly concerning the different names by which men, Aesir, elves, dwarves, giants, and others call various things.

Hyndluljod (“The Lay of Hyndla”) concerns the quest of the goddess Freyja and the seeress Hyndla to establish the pedigree of Freyja’s protégé Ottar the Simple, so he can come into his inheritance. Thor is mentioned only in passing.

Snorri Sturluson and the *Prose Edda*

Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) was an Icelandic poet and politician. Although he reached the highest office in the land, that of *logsogumadur* (lawspeaker) of Iceland’s Althing parliament, he is best known today for having written the *Prose Edda* and the *Heimskringla*.

The *Heimskringla* is a history of the kings of Norway, and its only mythological content is found in the *Ynglinga Saga*, which covers the period from the dawn of time until the rule of Halfdan the Black in the 9th century. The *Prose Edda*, on the other hand, is a collection of Norse legend and history that constitutes one of the two major extant sources for Norse mythology.

The *Prose Edda* (also known as the *Younger Edda*) consists of a prologue and three chapters: *Gylfaginning*, *Skaldskaparmal* and *Hattatal*.



A 19th century woodcut image of Snorri Sturluson by Christian Krohg. (PD-US)

SOURCES FOR THE EDDAS

The *Codex Regius* (“king’s manuscript”) the main source for the *Verse Edda* was discovered in the 17th century, when the bishop of Skalholt in Iceland sent it as a gift to King Frederick III of Denmark: it was at this time that it acquired its name. It remained in the Royal Library in Copenhagen until 1971, when it was returned to Iceland. It is written on vellum, and 45 leaves survive; eight went missing at some point in its history.

Confusingly, one of the main sources for the *Prose Edda*, sent to Frederick as part of the same gift, is also called the *Codex Regius*. It consists of 55 vellum leaves, and was returned to Iceland in 1985.

Not all of the *Eddas*’ content is found in the *Codex Regius*, and scholars have worked to reassemble what they can from many other manuscripts.



The cover of an 18th-century edition of the *Prose Edda*, now in the Icelandic National Library. (PD-US)

Prologue

The Prologue is an attempt to tie the origins of Norse myth into the classical world of Greece and Rome. This was a common exercise among the historians of northern and western Europe at a time when the classical world was regarded as the fount of all civilization and culture. The English historian Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-1155), for example, claims in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (“History of the Kings of Britain”) that Britain’s first king was a Roman named Brutus, whose descent he traces back to Troy and the Greek gods.

For his part, Snorri claims that Thor was a grandson of Priam, the last Trojan king from Homer’s *Iliad*. He goes on to make Odin Thor’s grandson. Thor’s descendants make their way to Scandinavia and are welcomed as “men of Asia,” which is how Snorri explains the origin of the Norse term *Aesir*.

Gylfaginning

Gylfaginning (“The Tricking of Gylfi”) is a story

of about 20,000 words, and deals with the beginning and the end of the world according to Norse myth.

The chapter takes its name from Gylfi, a king of Sweden who welcomes the Aesir to Scandinavia in the Prologue. The story begins when Gylfi is tricked by an Aesir goddess, and wonders whether all Aesir use magic and trickery.

HIGH, JUST-AS-HIGH, AND THIRD

The nature of these three figures is never made clear in the *Gylfaginning*. Since Gylfi is traveling to Asgard, though, they may be gods in disguise. Many Norse temples seem to have had three idols – Odin, Thor, and Frey – sitting together. Perhaps High, Just-as-High, and Third are these gods under false names. Most Norse gods had multiple names, and Odin in particular was fond of using aliases.

Gylfi questions the three strangers in *Gylfaginning*. From an 18th-century Icelandic manuscript in the Arni Magnússon Institute in Iceland. (PD-US)



KENNINGS

kennings are a poetic device popular in Norse literature. They are basically metaphors that use the form “X of the Y” (or the simpler “Y-X”) in place of a single noun. Thus, a *kenning* for a ship might be “wave-serpent,” referring to a dragon stem-post and to the vessel’s deadliness in battle.

The most admired *kennings* were derived from Norse myth and literature. For example, a *kenning* for gold was

“Sif’s hair,” referring to a myth in which Loki cut off Sif’s hair as a cruel joke, and the dwarves made her new hair out of gold. The more obscure and original a *kenning* was, the more the speaker or writer would be admired.

The most common *kenning* referring to Thor was “giant-slayer.” His fondness for fighting giants will be seen in a later chapter.

Determined to find out, Gylfi sets out for Asgard, but is tricked along the way and finds himself in a great palace where three men (named High, Just-as-High, and Third) challenge him to show his wisdom by questioning them. The questions he asks are about the gods and the world’s beginning and end, and the answers of these three mysterious strangers make up most of the chapter’s text.

Skaldskaparmal

Skaldskaparmal (“The Language of Poetry”) is a chapter of about 50,000 words and takes the form of a dialogue between Aegir, the god of the sea, and Bragi, the god of poetry. The two discuss the finer points of poetic style, and along the way Bragi gives the origins of a number of *kennings*, many of which owe their origins to myths and legends.

Hattatal

Hattatal (“List of Verse-Forms”) is a chapter of about 20,000 words. It is a poem of praise in traditional skaldic style lauding King Hakon Hakonarson of Norway (1204-63) and his coregent and future father-in-law Earl Skuli (1188/9-1240) for their generosity and valor. It exemplifies a wide variety of 13th-century Norse verse-forms and is accompanied by a prose commentary that points out the main features of each verse-form.

Hattatal contains no significant mythological content.

HOW THOR GOT HIS HAMMER

This tale from the *Skaldskaparmal* tells how the great magical hammer named Mjolnir came to Thor as a result of one of Loki's pranks. Thor's wife, the earth-goddess Sif, was renowned for the beauty of her golden hair until one day Loki cut it off in a fit of mischief. Thor was so angry that Loki feared for his life, and promised to make good the damage he had caused. Being Loki, of course, he could not do it without playing a prank on someone else.

A group of dwarves called the Sons of Ivaldi had made several great magical treasures for the Aesir. These included Odin's spear Gungnir, which never missed its target, and Frey's magical ship Skidbladnir, which always had a following wind and was large enough to carry all the Aesir, despite the fact that Frey could fold it up like cloth and carry it in his pouch.

Loki persuaded these talented dwarves to make new hair for Sif out of pure gold, and they succeeded. Not only did Sif's new hair look real, but it also grew like natural hair. Then Loki saw an opportunity for further mischief.

He approached two more dwarves, a pair of brothers called Brokk and Sindri, and bet them that they could not create anything to compete with these wonders. He offered them his own head as a wager, and they accepted eagerly.

To make sure he would not lose the bet, Loki turned himself into a fly and buzzed around the brothers' forge, biting them to distract them from their work. Despite being stung on the hand, Brokk was able to keep the bellows working without a stop until Sindri had made a magical boar named Gullinbursti ("Golden Bristles"). Gullinbursti could run through air and over water, and its golden hide was so bright that it banished darkness wherever it went. Gullinbursti was presented to the god Frey and pulled his chariot.

Sindri creates Mjolnir while Brokk is tormented by Loki in the form of a fly. Arthur Rackham, 1901. (PD-US)



THOR'S TREASURES

According to myth, Thor owned a number of magical treasures:

The magical hammer Mjolnir ("Crusher") was made by the dwarves Brokk and Sindri, who also made the most of the Norse gods' other magical treasures. It was a fearsome weapon, capable of flattening mountains. When he threw it, Mjolnir never failed to strike its target, and always flew back to his hand. When Thor wanted, Mjolnir could become so small that he could keep it inside his tunic. The tale repeated here is the only place in Norse myth that refers to Mjolnir being short in the handle, and it seems that this reference was only put in for the sake of the story: on his third attempt to distract the dwarves from their task, Loki manages to ruin one item in a small way. Otherwise the hammer is depicted at various sizes.

The belt Megingjord ("Belt of Power") doubled Thor's strength, which was already prodigious. The gloves Jarngreipr ("Iron Gripper") allowed Thor to wield Mjolnir. It is not clear whether the gloves gave Thor the necessary strength, or whether they were needed for some other reason.

In some stories, Thor rode in a chariot pulled by two magical goats, Tanngrisnir ("Teeth-barer") and Tannngjostr ("Teeth-grinder"). Thor could kill and eat them, using the power of Mjolnir to resurrect them for the next day's travel. In one story, the child of a peasant family with whom Thor shared a goat dinner broke one of their bones to suck out the marrow; as a result, one of the goats (the story does not say which) was left permanently lame.

Sindri put some more gold in the brothers' furnace and told Brokk to keep working the bellows. Determined to keep his head, Loki remained in his fly-form and bit Brokk twice on the neck. Brokk kept working the bellows, however, and Sindri used the gold to make a gold ring called Draupnir ("dripper"), which was presented to Odin. Draupnir had the magical property of creating, or "dripping" from itself eight gold rings of equal weight on every ninth night.

The brothers kept working, fashioning a mighty hammer (although some sources refer to Mjolnir as an axe or a club). Loki bit Brokk again, this time on the eye, and he stopped working the bellows for a moment. As a result, Mjolnir was a little short in the handle, which is why Thor needed the magical iron gloves Jarngreipr to wield it. Mjolnir's magic was such that it would never miss a target at which it was thrown, and it would always return to the thrower's hand.

Even with its short handle, the Aesir all agreed that the hammer was the best of all their treasures. They decided that this mighty weapon belonged in the hands of their mightiest warrior, and it was given to Thor.

Having lost his wager with Brokk and Sindri, Loki tried to flee. Thor caught him and handed him over to the dwarves so that they could collect their due by cutting off the trickster's head. However, they were thwarted when Loki argued that they could not cut off his head without harming his neck, and his neck was not part of the wager. The two dwarves contented themselves with sewing the trickster's mouth shut.

THOR AND UTGARDALOKI

This long tale is told in *Gylfaginning*. Thor shows his usual strength and determination, but they do him little good in the face of an opponent who is both wily and magical. Utgardaloki humbles Thor in a variety of ways, casting doubt upon his strength at every turn until in the end it is revealed that the Thunder God has been the victim of a series of illusions. His strength and prowess are still unsurpassed; only in the face of trickery is he powerless.

In talking with the three mysterious figures he meets in Asgard, Gylfi asks whether Thor has ever been defeated. One of them responds by telling the following tale:

Thjalfi and Roskva

Thor and Loki were traveling together and stopped at a farm for the night. To repay the farmer's hospitality, Thor killed his goats and made a stew. The farmer's son, whose name was Thjalfi, cracked one of the bones to eat the marrow, and when Thor used the magic of Mjolnir to resurrect his goats the following morning, he found that one of them was lame.

Thor's scowl at this discovery so frightened the farmer and his family that they offered him Thjalfi and his sister Roskva as servants. Thjalfi remained in the Thunder God's service from then on, but Roskva is hardly mentioned.

The Giant Skrymir

Leaving the goats behind, Thor and his companions traveled into Jotunheim. Passing through a great forest, they looked for a place to spend the night, and at last they came upon a great hall and went inside. The hall was empty, but about midnight they were disturbed by a terrible earthquake and took refuge in a small side-chamber. Thor stood guard over the entrance, his hammer in his hand. For the rest of the night, a great moaning and roaring kept the companions awake.

When dawn came, the group emerged from the hall to find a giant sleeping not far from the building. He was snoring very loudly, and Thor realized that this was the noise they had heard during the night. He put on his strength-boosting belt Megingjord just as the man awoke. As he stood up it was clear he was a giant of immense size, and for once Thor was not prepared to strike him down.

The giant said his name was Skrymir ("Big Fellow"), and asked what Thor had done with his glove. Thor and his companions were puzzled until Skrymir reached out and picked up the hall where the travelers had spent the night. It was an immense glove, and the side-chamber where they had taken refuge was the thumb.

After he had put his glove back on, Skrymir asked the companions if he could travel with them, and they agreed. Skrymir offered to carry all the group's provisions, and the others put their food in his sack.

The following night, while Skrymir was asleep, Thor tried to open his sack to get something to eat, but could not loosen the strings at all. In his frustration,



E. S. BROOK

Thor fearlessly walked up to this strange monster to have a better look at him.

Thor grasped his hammer Mjolnir and aimed a mighty blow at Skrymir's head. The giant woke up and asked mildly if a leaf had fallen on his head.

Skrymir went back to sleep, but his snoring kept Thor and the others awake. Thor struck him another blow with his hammer, this time so hard that Mjolnir's head sank deep into the giant's crown. Skrymir awoke again and asked if an acorn had fallen on him. Thor retreated and waited for Skrymir to go back to sleep.

Shortly before daybreak, Thor saw that Skrymir was asleep again. He struck him another blow, sinking Mjolnir up to its handle into the giant's temple. Skrymir sat up and rubbed his head, asking if there was a bird in the branches above him that might have dislodged a piece of moss.

Since the sun was already rising, Skrymir suggested that the group should travel on. There was a hall named Utgard that was not too far off. Before they got there, he warned his companions to be careful of their manners; they might think he was big, but he was quite small compared to Utgard's ruler, Utgardaloki, and his servants. Thor and the others were puny by comparison, and it would be dangerous for them if they caused offence. As for himself, he would continue his journey to the north. He parted company with the rest of the group and set off.

Utgard

Thor and his companions journeyed on till noon, when they arrived at a vast fortress. Even with his Aesir strength, Thor was unable to open the huge gate that guarded the entrance, and the travelers were forced to squeeze between its bars.

They went to Utgardaloki and greeted him courteously, but he treated them with contempt. He made some disparaging comments about Thor's small stature, and told the companions that no one could stay in Utgard unless they proved themselves capable of some superhuman feat.

Quick-witted Loki stepped forward and boasted that no one could eat faster than he could. Utgardaloki smiled and ordered a meat-filled trough set up on the floor. Loki was stationed at one end, and at the other sat one of Utgardaloki's servants, whose name was Logi. Food was brought in, and the two began to eat. They ate their way along the trough until they met exactly in the middle. Even so, Loki lost the contest. While he had eaten all the meat in his half of the trough, his opponent had eaten the meat, the bones, and the trough itself.

Utgardaloki turned to Thor's servant Thjalfi, and asked what he could do. Thjalfi answered that he would try a foot-race against anyone his host might choose. Utgardaloki summoned another of his servants, whose name was Hugi, and led the company to a flat plain outside the fortress.

The race was run in three heats. In the first heat, Hugi was barely ahead of Thjalfi when he turned at the halfway point. Hugi admitted that he had never met anyone who was faster than Thjalfi. In the second heat, however,

Thjalfi lagged behind by a bow-shot when Hugi reached the turning-point. In the third, Thjalfi had not reached the middle of the course by the time Hugi turned around. Everyone agreed that Hugi was the winner.

Now Utgardaloki turned to Thor and asked him what feat he wished to display. Thor chose a drinking-contest, and an ale-horn was brought in. It was not unusually large, although Thor did notice that it seemed very long. Utgardaloki challenged Thor to empty the horn in a single draught. Some men took two draughts, he said, but even the poorest drinker could empty it in three.

Thor raised the horn and swallowed until his breath gave out, but the horn seemed no less full than when he had started. Utgardaloki told him he had expected better from all the tales he had heard of Thor's exploits, and invited him to drink a second draught. Thor raised the horn and drank again, but did no better than before. Utgardaloki chided him, asking if he had overestimated his ability by leaving more for the third draught than he could manage. Worse, he wondered aloud if Thor's reputation had been exaggerated.

Stung by this, Thor drank with all his might, but although the level was visibly lower he was still unable to empty the drinking-horn. Utgardaloki observed that Thor's might was not as great as he had supposed, but offered him the chance of another challenge if he wished to take it. Thor countered that among the Aesir such a drink would not be considered small, and said that he was ready to accept any other challenge.

Utgardaloki pointed out a sleeping cat and challenged Thor to lift it. He said that the young men of Utgard did such things for sport; he would not have offered Thor such a puny challenge if he had not already seen that Thor's strength was far less than he had previously believed.

The cat was gray and rather large, but Thor grabbed it around the middle and tried to lift it up. Although he was able to raise the cat's middle, its paws stayed on the floor. Thor stretched as high as he could and finally one paw left the ground, but that was as much as he could do. Utgardaloki admitted that the cat was rather large, and pointed out that Thor was rather small by the standards of Utgard.

Mad with frustration by now, Thor retorted that whatever his size might be, he was ready to wrestle with anyone who dared take him on. Utgardaloki looked around at the benches where his servants were seated, and mused that it would be hard to find anyone who would regard a wrestling-match with Thor as any kind of challenge. Finally he called upon his foster-mother, an old woman named Elli, and bade her wrestle with the Thunder God.

Thor took hold of Elli and tried to grapple with her, but the tighter his hold the firmer she seemed to stand. They stood deadlocked. Then Elli moved slightly and Thor lost his footing. They wrestled for a long time, but finally Elli was able to force Thor down onto one knee.

Utgardaloki stopped the bout and declared that it was time to eat. For the rest of the evening, the visitors enjoyed the best of hospitality.

The Truth Revealed

The following morning, Utgardaloki provided his visitors with the best of breakfasts and sent them on their way. Before they left, however, he spoke to Thor, asking if he had ever before met anyone who was stronger than he was. Thor admitted that he had been humiliated and embarrassed by his experience in Utgard. Utgardaloki said that he would now tell Thor the truth, since he did not expect Thor ever to return to Utgard. Indeed, he said, he would never have permitted Thor to enter his hall if he had known how strong he truly was.

Firstly, said Utgardaloki, the giant Skrymir with whom the companions had traveled was Utgardaloki himself, in disguise. Thor could not open Skrymir's sack because he had tied it with iron bands and made sure that Thor could not find them. When Thor struck three times at Skrymir's head, Skrymir

had woven an illusion that made Thor hit a nearby mountain instead; the mountain was now cloven by three square valleys, each deeper than the last.

Next Utgardaloki explained why his visitors had lost their contests with his servants. Logi, to whom Loki lost the eating contest, was really Wildfire, which consumes everything in its path with frightening speed. Hugi, who beat Thjalfi in the foot-race, was actually Thought, and nothing is swifter than thought.

Finally, Utgardaloki revealed the truth behind Thor's three challenges.

Thor was unable to drain the drinking-horn because its far end was in the sea. Although Thor could not drink up all the oceans, he had drunk enough to lower the waters to ebb tide. Utgardaloki admitted that he had never thought such a feat was possible.

The large gray cat that Thor had failed to lift up was actually the world-encircling Midgard Serpent, disguised by another of Utgardaloki's illusions. When Thor picked it up his hands almost reached the stars, and the Midgard Serpent's head and tail almost left the ground.

Elli, the old woman who had wrestled Thor to one knee, was none other than Old Age itself, which overcomes everyone in the end.

Having revealed his deceptions, Utgardaloki warned Thor never to return, promising that he would defend Utgard with equally powerful illusions if the Thunder God ever troubled him.

Enraged by Utgardaloki's duplicity, Thor raised his hammer to strike him down, but the giant was no longer there. Thor turned toward Utgard, intending to batter it to rubble, but the fortress had also vanished, leaving only a beautiful but empty plain.

In frustration, Thor returned to his hall at Thrudvang. He never forgot his humiliation at Utgardaloki's hands, though, and he promised himself a reckoning against the giants and against the Midgard Serpent itself.



An image of Thor from an 18th-century Icelandic manuscript. (PD-US)

GIANTS AND TROLLS

Today, thanks largely to the influence of *Dungeons & Dragons* and other fantasy games, giants and trolls are regarded as very different creatures. In Norse myth, however, the words "giant" and "troll" seem to have been synonymous – indeed there are instances where both words are used to describe the same creature.

In post-Viking folklore, trolls can be almost any size and their appearance and other characteristics are extremely various. In modern Danish the word *trolldom* means magic in general, and the phrase "*svaerd og trolldom*" has the same meaning as the English "sword and sorcery."