

# AEGIR'S FEAST

Aegir (not to be confused with the Aesir, the divine tribe of which Thor is a member) is a slightly enigmatic figure in Norse mythology. Some scholars regard him as a god of the ocean, while others see him as a powerful giant who lived beneath the sea.

This legend is found partly in *Lokasenna* and partly in *Hymiskvida*. Another version, told in *Gylfaginning*, covers only the fishing expedition and states that Thor visits Hymir in the guise of a mortal youth, disguising his strength and divine power.

The story of Thor's catching the Midgard Serpent is represented in several sources that are older than the *Eddas*. The 9<sup>th</sup>-century *Ragnarsdrapa* includes a version of the tale, as do the 10<sup>th</sup>-century *Husdrapa* and fragments of two other 10<sup>th</sup>-century poems. In the first two cases, the poets describe not the event itself, but representations of it on a shield (which, since it is also said to bear images from three other legends, must be nothing more than a narrative device) and in the carvings of a hall owned by a wealthy Icelandic merchant.

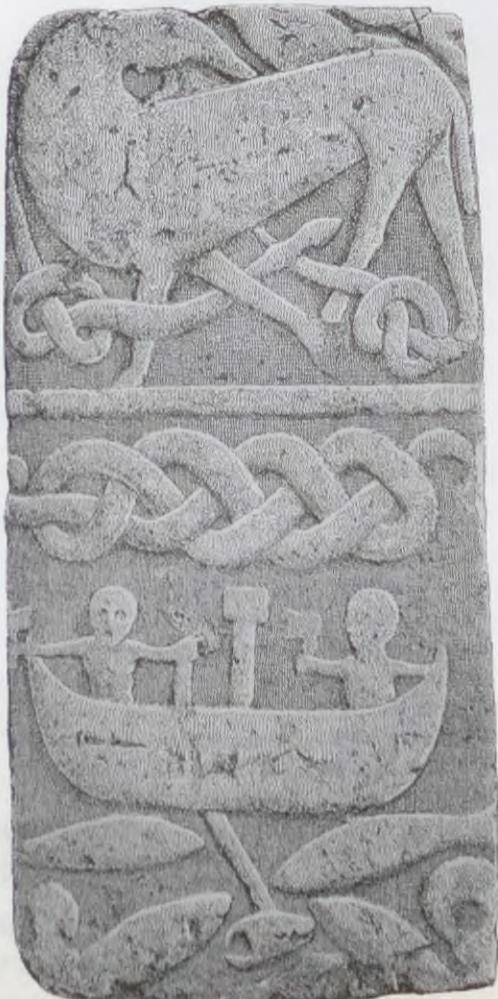
Images of Thor hooking Jormungand can be found on several carved stones from the Viking Age, including a 10<sup>th</sup>-century cross in St Mary's churchyard at Gosforth in the English county of Cumbria.

## Thor Hooks the Midgard Serpent

The Aesir visited Aegir and he prepared a feast for them. Aegir was famed for the number and size of his cauldrons, and when they saw them the Aesir decided that Aegir should host all their gatherings in future.

Aegir could not refuse them without being a bad host, but he set one condition that the Aesir should provide him with a cauldron large enough to warm mead for all of them at once. Even among such a collection of cauldrons as he possessed, there was no vessel large enough to do so. Tyr, the god of the law, remembered that his father Hymir owned a vessel that was no less than a *rast* (about 7 miles)

A part of the Gosforth Cross, showing Thor fishing for the Midgard Serpent. (PD-US)



deep, which would answer Aegir's need perfectly. Tyr and Thor set out to bring this huge cauldron back to Aegir's hall.

When the two gods arrived at Hymir's steading, they were confronted at first by Tyr's grandmother, an ugly giantess with nine hundred heads. Then Tyr's mother came out, "all-golden" and "fair-browed," and offered a cup of ale to her son. She warned the two gods to hide under Hymir's cauldrons, saying that he was often ill-disposed to receiving guests.

When Hymir returned from hunting, they found that Tyr's mother had been right. His beard was crusted with ice, and the icebergs cracked under his fierce gaze. When Tyr's mother told him that he had visitors, Hymir's glance

(Over  
world  
Serpent)

shattered one of the hall's pillars, sending cauldrons crashing to the floor and breaking all but one.

Although Hymir was not pleased to see that one of his visitors was the renowned giant-slayer Thor, he grudgingly offered the two his hospitality. He ordered three oxen to be slaughtered for a feast. Thor ate two of them by himself. It was agreed that on the next day, they would be forced to eat whatever they could catch. Sent to find bait, Thor cut off the head of Hymir's best ox and carried it to Hymir's boat.

The three rowed out to Hymir's favorite fishing spot, but Thor insisted on heading into deeper waters in search of a better catch. Hymir caught two whales, but then Thor fastened the ox-head to a line and threw it overboard. Almost immediately, he hooked the largest creature in the sea: Jormungand, the world-encircling Midgard Serpent.

Jormungand fought with all its immense strength, but Thor would not let go of his line, even when the Midgard Serpent pulled him through the bottom of the boat. Bracing his feet against the ocean floor, Thor hauled Jormungand up to the side of the boat.

As the Midgard Serpent towered above their vessel, venom spewing from its jaws, Thor prepared to strike out at it with his hammer. Before he could

do so, however, a panicked Hymir cut the line and released the mighty beast. In a rage, Thor threw his hammer at the Serpent, striking it in the head but apparently not killing it. Then, he turned his frustration on Hymir and struck him on the side of the head with his hand. The force of the blow flung the giant from the boat, and Thor waded back to shore.

Once the whales had been brought in and they were eating, Hymir insulted Thor's strength, saying that the Thunder God could not even break Hymir's wine-cup. Thor dashed the cup against a stone. The stone split in two, but the cup remained intact. Thor was baffled until Tyr's mother advised him to break the cup against Hymir's head. He did so, and the cup shattered.

After this, Hymir agreed to let the Aesir have the cauldron they asked for, if they could take it out of his hall. Tyr tried twice, but could not even lift it. Thor grasped the vessel by the rim and tried to lift it up, but its weight forced him through the floor. Finally he managed to raise the cauldron onto his head, and they set off for Aegir's hall.

Hymir was not willing to let the Aesir go so easily. He pursued them with "a troop of many-headed monsters," but Thor set down the cauldron and threw his hammer Mjolnir at their pursuers, killing all of them including Hymir. Then the two gods returned in triumph to Aegir's hall, bearing the gigantic cauldron.

## Loki's Insult

This tale, recounted in *Lokasenna*, continues the previous story.

When Thor and Tyr returned with Hymir's cauldron, Aegir brewed enough ale for all the Aesir. Thor was absent, but the other gods all assembled for the feast. Among them was the troublemaking Loki, who was in a foul mood because the Aesir had recently bound Loki's offspring Fenrir (also known as Fenris), a gigantic wolf who according to prophecy would kill Odin at Ragnarok.

Aegir's servants Fimafeng and Eldir welcomed the Aesir to the hall. The gods were impressed by how well these two attended to their duties, and Loki grew so tired of hearing their praise that he killed Fimafeng. As a result, he was banished from the feast. Encountering Eldir a little while later, Loki asked what the Aesir were talking about. Eldir answered that the gods were discussing their might at arms, and added that no one had a kind word for Loki.

Enraged, Loki went back into Aegir's hall, demanding hospitality according to custom. Bragi, the god of poetry, told Loki once more that he was unwelcome. After Loki reminded Odin of an oath that he and Loki would drink together, Odin reluctantly told his son Vidar to give up his place to the trickster god. Vidar did so, and even poured a drink for Loki.

Taking the drink, Loki offered a toast to all the assembled gods, pointedly excluding Bragi. Bragi responded by offering Loki a horse, a ring and a sword to mend things between them, but Loki rejected the gifts, accusing Bragi of cowardice for offering them. Bragi responded to Loki's insult by saying that he

would have taken Loki's head if it were not for the fact that they were under the peace of Aegir's hall. Loki insulted Bragi's courage again, saying that he was brave enough while he stayed in his seat.

When the goddess Idun tried to intercede, Loki accused her of having loose morals. He went on to insult all the gods in turn, pouring his malice upon everyone who spoke to him. He accused the goddess Gefion of immorality as well, and when Odin protested he claimed that he gave victory to cowards and criticized him for traveling among mortals in disguise rather than admitting his identity.

Odin's wife Frigga tried to quell the argument, but Loki dismissed her as having always been too fond of men. Wounded, Frigga replied that she would not have to suffer such insults if her son Balder were still alive, prompting Loki to gloat about his part in Balder's death.

Freyja, the goddess of love and fertility, now tried to calm Loki, but he shot back that there was no man in Aegir's hall who had not been her lover. When she protested at his insults, Loki went further. She was a witch, he said, and had even slept with her own brother Frey.

Freyja and Frey's father, the Vanir god Njord, now objected. Loki reminded him that he had come to Asgard as a hostage to secure peace after a long-ago Aesir-Vanir war, and accused him of improper relations with giantesses. When Njord told Loki that he was glad he had a son whom no one hated (unlike Loki, who had fathered Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent), Loki retorted that Njord had got his son and his daughter through incest with his own sister.

Tyr came to Frey's defense, but Loki cut him down by saying that the law-god was impotent to settle any quarrel. He also reminded him of his missing hand, which Fenrir had torn from him when the Aesir tricked him. Tyr replied that he would rather be missing his hand than his reputation, and noted that Fenrir was bound up until Ragnarok. Loki responded to this by pointing out that he had other sons – including, he claimed, one by Tyr's wife.

Frey stepped in at this point, threatening Loki that he would be bound up like Fenrir if he did not be quiet. Loki noted that Frey would have no sword at Ragnarok, and claimed that he had traded it to the giant Gymir to buy his daughter Gerd for a wife.

Byggvir now addressed Loki. He is an obscure deity, not known outside this one story: his name may be related to the Old Norse word for barley. He said that if he were of Frey's race he would crush Loki, but Loki dismissed him, accusing him of cowardice: "lying in thy truckle bed, thou wast not to be found while men were fighting."

When Heimdall accused Loki of being drunk, Loki responded that he was of no account since he was just a watchman. When the goddess Skadi objected, Loki claimed she had once taken him to her bed.

Thor's wife Sif offered Loki a drink to restore the peace, begging him not to tarnish her reputation. Loki called her an adulteress, claiming that she once betrayed her husband with Loki himself.

At this point Thor returned from whatever journey had kept him from arriving with the rest of the Aesir. He threatened to knock Loki's head off with his hammer, but Loki was unimpressed, pointing out that Thor will be unable to save his father Odin from the jaws of Fenrir at Ragnarok.

Thor threatened Loki again, promising to knock him "into the east region" (possibly meaning all the way to Jotunheim), where no one would ever see him again. Loki laughed, reminding Thor how he had once cowered in the thumb of Utgardaloki's glove.

Thor threatened Loki a third time, saying that Mjolnir would break every bone in his body. Loki reminded him of another of his misadventures with Utgardaloki, when he was too weak to open the food-sack belonging to the giant Skrymir.

Finally, Thor threatened to hit Loki so hard that he would be cast down to Hel. At this Loki finally agreed to leave, but not without a parting shot. Aegir, he prophesied, would never host another gathering: fire would take his hall and all his possessions.

# THOR AND THE GIANTS

Utgardaloki was not the only giant who crossed Thor's path, though he seems to have been the only one to get the better of the Thunder God. According to the *Eddas*, fighting giants was Thor's favorite pastime. Their enormous size and strength seems to have made them the only foes he considered worthy. His exploits against the giants were so well known that "giant-slayer" was a commonly-used *kenning* referring to him.

This chapter relates a few of his better-known exploits against the giants.

## Thor's Duel with Hrungnir

This tale from the *Skaldskaparmal* is typical of Thor's exploits against the giants. It stresses both their great size and their ill manners, while emphasizing Thor's strength and prowess in battle. The oldest known version of the tale is in a 10<sup>th</sup>-century poem called *Haustlong*, which describes an image from the story painted onto a shield.

The story begins when Odin is riding through Jotunheim, one of the giant realms, on his eight-legged horse Sleipnir. He met with a giant named Hrungnir ("the Brawler"), who admired Sleipnir but boasted that his own horse, Goldfax ("Gold-man") had a longer stride.

Odin wagered his head that no horse in Jotunheim could match Sleipnir, and Hrungnir leaped onto Goldfax and chased after him. The race ended at

## THE GIANTS

Jotunheim lies to the east of Asgard, and its inhabitants, beside being immense of stature, are usually crude, violent, and envious of all that the Aesir possess. Their names bear out their character: Hrungnir ("Brawler"), Thrym ("Uproar"), Thrivaldi ("Thrice Mighty"), Angrboda ("Grief-bringer"), and so on.

Most Jotuns are human-looking, but a few are not. Thrivaldi had nine heads (all of which, according to a passing mention in the *Skaldskaparmal*, Thor clove

apart), while Thjazi scarcely ever appears in humanoid form, preferring that of a giant eagle.

Thor's fondness for slaying giants is more than a love of battle and a search for worthy opponents, although these are certainly powerful motives. By killing giants on their own territory, he is discouraging them from coming to Asgard and causing trouble, thus protecting not only Asgard itself but the mortal realm of Midgard beyond it.

(Opposite) Thor disguises himself as a bride to get his hammer back from the giant Thrym.

the gates of Asgard with Odin still in the lead. When they arrived, Odin invited Hrungnir into his hall of Valhalla.

Freyja and the other goddesses served Hrungnir with mead. He drank bowl after bowl, and as he became drunk his boasting increased. Admiring Odin's hall, Hrungnir said that he would move it to Jotunheim and live in it himself. First he would have to kill all the Aesir, except for Freyja and Sif, Thor's wife, whom he would take with him.

Eventually the Aesir tired of their ill-mannered guest, and called Thor. He scowled to see a giant slumped half-drunk in Odin's hall and demanded to know what right Hrungnir had to be there. Hrungnir replied that he was Odin's guest and under his protection. He taunted Thor further, pointing out that the Thunder God could not honorably attack him because he had left his own weapons at home in Jotunheim. However, he said, if Thor would go to Jotunheim he would consent to fight a duel. Thor readily agreed.

Hrungnir returned to Jotunheim, and word quickly spread that he was going to fight a duel with Thor. Hrungnir was by far the strongest of the giants, but Thor was one of the strongest of the Aesir, and easily the most dangerous. The giants worried about what to do.

Eventually they decided to create a second for Hrungnir: an immense clay man they called Mokkerkalfe (Mist-calf). He was nine *rasts* tall and three *rasts* broad across the chest. He had a horse's heart, which was the largest the giants could find, but even this trembled and fluttered when Thor approached, accompanied by his servant Thjalfi. Hrungnir's heart was made of stone like the rest of him, and he stood his ground. Mokkerkalfe, on the other hand, wet himself at the sight of Thor.

Thjalfi ran ahead to where Hrungnir stood, armed with a stone shield and an immense club of flint. He told the giant that it was foolish to hold his stone shield in front of him, because Thor intended to sink into the ground and attack him from below.

Hearing this, Hrungnir put his shield on the ground and stood on top of it, taking his stone club in both hands. A flash of lightning blinded Hrungnir temporarily, and when he regained his sight he could see Thor charging toward him.

The Thunder God threw his great hammer Mjolnir, and the giant threw his own club to intercept the hammer in mid-air. The collision broke Hrungnir's club in two; one part fell to

## RASTS

A *rast* ("rest") was the distance one could walk between rest stops. It has been estimated as a little over 7 miles (11.3km). This makes the clay man Mokkerkalfe over 63 miles tall and 21 miles wide. Exaggeration was a common feature of Viking tales, and we can assume that the size of the clay giant has grown in the telling.

the ground and the other struck Thor in the head, knocking him down. Having broken Hrungnir's club, Mjolnir struck the giant's head, killing him instantly.

The giant toppled over like an immense felled tree. One of his feet came to rest across Thor's body, and even with his divine strength the Thunder God was unable to move the foot off him. Meanwhile Thjalfi attacked Mokkerkalfe, who fell with little honor.

Thor was still trapped under Hrungnir's foot. Thjalfi tried to help lift it off him, but it was too heavy. The other Aesir also tried, but no one was able to lift the giant's foot and free Thor. At last, Thor's three-day-old son Magni ("Strong") arrived. His mother was the giantess Jarnsaxa ("Iron-knife") and only he had the strength to lift Hrungnir's foot and free his father.

The flint from Hrungnir's weapon was still stuck in Thor's head. He consulted a wise-woman named Groa to remove it, but while she was singing her magic songs Thor started telling her the stories of his adventures (see *The Stone in Thor's Head*). She forgot her singing, and the stone remained lodged in Thor's head forever after.

## Thrym's Wedding

This semi-comic tale from the *Thrymskvida* puts Thor in an undignified position when his famous hammer is stolen and he must adopt a disguise to get it back. Like his adventures in Utgard, the story makes Thor as much a figure of fun as a hero. The story of how Thrym was able to steal Thor's hammer is either missing or not told.



Thor drops his bridal disguise and prepares to slaughter Thrym and his kin in this Swedish illustration from 1865. (PD-US)

When Loki took this news back to Asgard, Freyja was horrified. Her rage made the halls of Asgard shake and shattered her famous necklace Brisingamen. She wanted nothing to do with Thrym, and the Aesir were forced to come up with another plan.

Heimdall was the guardian of the rainbow bridge Bifrost that connected Asgard to the mortal realm of Midgard ("middle-earth"). He was among the wisest of the Aesir and had the gift of foresight. He suggested a plan that would win Mjolnir back and give Thor his revenge against the thief.

Heimdall suggested that the Aesir should disguise Thor as Freyja, dressing him in bridal garments and fastening the repaired Brisingamen around his neck. Accompanied by Loki dressed as a bridesmaid, the two would go to Jotunheim and reclaim Mjolnir when Thrym brought it out for the wedding ceremony.

Humiliated by the thought of dressing as a bride, Thor was as reluctant to take part in Thrym's wedding as Freyja had been. Loki was finally able to overcome Thor's reluctance by pointing out that unless the Aesir recovered his hammer quickly, the giants would be able to walk into Asgard and take over. Hearing this, Thor grudgingly agreed to the plan.

Dressed as a bride and bridesmaid, Thor and Loki set out for Jotunheim in Thor's magical chariot. Thrym was taken in by the deception, although he was surprised when his "bride" devoured a whole ox and eight salmon at the wedding feast, as well as drinking three *salds* (about 66 gallons) of mead. Loki quickly explained that Freyja had been so excited about her impending marriage that she had not eaten for eight days and nights before setting out for Jotunheim.

After finding his hammer missing, Thor went to Loki and demanded that he help find it. Loki borrowed Freyja's feathered garment, which allowed him to take the shape of a falcon, and eventually discovered that the culprit was Thrym ("Uproar"), the king of the giants of Jotunheim.

Thrym admitted that he had Mjolnir, but he told Loki that it was hidden eight *rasts* (about 56 miles) beneath the earth. He said that the Aesir would never get it back until they gave him the goddess Freyja as his wife.

Later in the feast, Thrym leaned across and tried to kiss his “bride,” but the sight of Thor’s burning eyes glaring out from beneath the bridal veil made him change his mind. Once again, Loki saved the situation, explaining that as well as being unable to eat, Freyja had not slept for eight nights as she longed for her wedding day.

At last Thrym ordered his servants to bring Mjolnir into the hall so it could consecrate his wedding. As soon as the hammer was laid in the lap of the “bride” Thor leaped up and smashed Thrym’s skull with it, and then slaughtered all the wedding-guests. With Mjolnir recovered and the threat from Jotunheim averted, Thor and Loki returned to Asgard.

## Thor and Geirrod

The earliest source for this story is the *Thorsdrapa* of Eilifr Godrunarson. Another version is told by Snorri Sturluson in the *Skaldskaparmal*, but there are significant differences between the two. Thor’s servant Thjalfi plays a major role in the *Thorsdrapa* but Snorri omits him from his version entirely, except where he quotes the *Thorsdrapa* extensively at the end of his telling of the tale.

### Loki’s Promise

It happened that Loki was flying about in Freyja’s falcon form and came to Geirrodsgard, the home of the giant Geirrod. Loki flew down to Geirrod’s hall and peered in through a window, but Geirrod spotted the bird and ordered one of his servants to bring it to him. Loki amused himself for some time evading the servant’s attempts to capture him, but at last the servant caught hold of his feet and he was unable to get away.

Geirrod suspected that this was no ordinary bird. He questioned Loki, but he did not answer. Geirrod locked Loki in a chest and starved him for three months before he was ready to speak. To save his own life, Loki promised Geirrod that he would bring Thor to his hall without his hammer or his belt of strength. Without these magical gifts, Thor would be at a great disadvantage. Geirrod agreed and let Loki go.

## THE STONE IN THOR’S HEAD

In *Lapponia*, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century account of the Lapps of northern Scandinavia, German scholar Johann Scheffer observed that the Lapps kept a rough wooden image of the Thunder God:

*Into his head they drive a nail of iron or steel, and a small piece of flint to strike fire with, if he hath a mind to it.*

Through his association with lightning Thor was also regarded as a fire god in some ways, and the legend of how a piece of flint became lodged in Thor’s head may reflect a Viking age practice of using an idol of Thor to make a ritual fire.

## *Thor's Journey*

Returning to Asgard, Loki talked Thor into mounting another expedition against the giants. Giant-slaying was one of Thor's favorite pastimes, so this was not a difficult task. However, the available sources do not tell how Loki persuaded the Thunder God to leave his hammer and magical belt behind. This must have been a great feat even for silver-tongued Loki, but it goes unrecorded.

Accompanied by his servant Thjalfi, Thor set out for Jotunheim. Along the way, he visited a giantess whose name was Gridr ("Greed"). She was the mother of Vidar, the Aesir god of vengeance, whose father was Odin.

Gridr warned Thor that Geirrod was a cunning and dangerous giant. Seeing that he was not carrying his magical gear, she lent him her own belt of strength, a pair of iron gloves, and a magical staff named Gridarvolr.

Leaving Gridr's house, Thor traveled to the banks of the River Vimer, which was the largest of all rivers. Buckling on his borrowed belt of strength, he braced himself with the staff Gridarvolr and waded into the rushing water. The waters rose and rose until they almost covered his shoulders, and Thor spoke a verse (possibly a magic spell):

Wax not, Vimer,  
Since I intend to wade  
To the gards (lands) of giants.  
Know, if you wax,  
Then waxes my asa (Aesir, divine) might  
As high as the heavens.

Translation by Rasmus B. Anderson, 1901

Looking up, Thor saw Geirrod's daughter Gjalp standing astride the stream and, as Snorri delicately puts it, "causing its growth." He drove her off by throwing a huge stone at her, and was able to reach out and grab a shrub to pull himself out of the river.

## *Geirrod's Hall*

When Thor and Thjalfi arrived at Geirrod's hall, the giant showed them to a guest room that was furnished with a single chair. Thor sat down, but quickly became aware that the chair was rising toward the ceiling. Bracing the staff Gridarvolr against the rafters, he pushed himself down against the seat.

He heard a great crash, accompanied by agonized screaming. Geirrod's two daughters, Gjalp and her sister Greip, had hidden under the chair and were lifting it up to crush their visitor against the ceiling; when Thor pushed himself down, he broke their backs.

Thor went into Geirrod's hall, where fires were burning all along the walls. Geirrod reached into one of the fires with a pair of tongs and pulled out a red-hot iron wedge, which he hurled at the Thunder God. When Thor caught the missile in his borrowed iron gloves, Geirrod ducked behind an iron pillar, but Thor threw the red-hot wedge so hard that it passed right through the pillar, through Geirrod's body, through the wall, and into the ground outside.

With Geirrod dead, Thor and Thjalfi fought their way out of his hall, slaughtering countless giants as they escaped.

# RAGNAROK

Norse mythology is unlike the mythologies of most other cultures in that it contains a detailed description of the end of the world, in which even the gods are killed.

There are two main sources for the events of Ragnarok. The *Poetic Edda* contains a poem called *Voluspa*, in which a *volva* or seeress gives Odin a detailed prophecy about the end of the world. In *Gylfaginning*, in the *Prose Edda*, another account is given as part of a general account of the world and the gods; this quotes extensively from the *Voluspa*.

Ragnarok is mentioned in several other places in the *Eddas*, but only in passing. Usually a character taunts one of the gods with something from the prophecy, as when Loki taunts Thor with the fact that he will not save Odin from the wolf Fenrir.

The Old Norse word “Ragnarok” can be translated as “the fate of the gods.” In one place in the *Lokasenna* a slightly different word-form is used, which may be an accidental misspelling or a deliberate variation: *ragnarøkkr* instead of *ragnarok*. The translation of *ragnarøkkr* is “twilight of the gods,” and it was taken by Richard Wagner as the title of the fourth opera in his Ring Cycle, *Gotterdämmerung*.

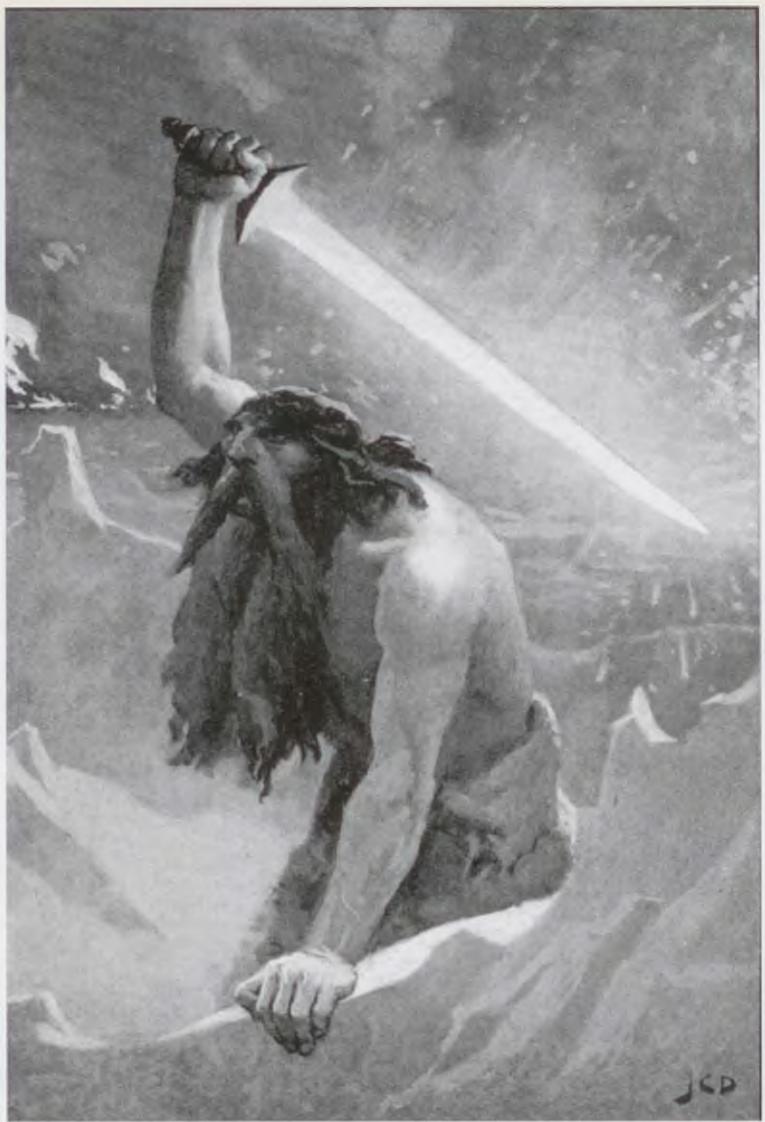
## Fimbulwinter

Ragnarok will begin with Fimbulvetr (“the great winter,” Fimbulwinter), a harsh and stormy winter that lasts for three years with no intervening summers. During this time, war and discord spread across the whole world. Family loyalty and other social ties break down completely as brothers kill their brothers for material gain:

There are axe-ages, sword-ages,  
Shields are cleft in twain,  
There are wind-ages, wolf-ages,  
Ere the world falls dead.

The Voluspa

Fimbulwinter will destroy all life in Midgard, except for a woman named Lif and a man named Lifthrasir (“Life” and “Lover of Life”) who survive by hiding in a deep forest called Hoddmimir’s holt. The location of this forest is unclear. Its name translates as “Hoard-Mimir’s Wood.” Mimir was a god of great wisdom who lost his head during a war between the Aesir and the Vanir. Odin consults Mimir’s severed head for advice in this myth and others.



Surtur with his flaming sword. John Charles Dollman, 1909. (PD-US)

## The Breaking of the Heavens

At the end of Fimbulwinter, a number of prodigious events take place. A great wolf swallows the sun, and another the moon. The stars are hurled down from the heavens. The earth is wracked by violent earthquakes that uproot trees and tumble mountains.

The wolf Fenrir breaks loose from the bonds in which he was placed by the Aesir. The Midgard Serpent stirs, thrashing in the sea and causing great waves to cover the land. Upon this flood comes Naglfari ("the ship of nails"), which is made from the nails of dead men. In some sources Loki stands at the tiller; in others, it is a giant named Hrym ("the decrepit"). The ship carries a horde of enemies who are not named, although Loki is said later to be leading the hordes of Hel and Thrym the Hrimthursar, or Frost Giants of Niflheim.

## The Attack on Asgard

Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent advance side by side toward Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that connects

the mortal realm of Midgard with the Aesir's home of Asgard. Fenrir gapes so wide that his jaws span heaven and earth, and fire shoots from his eyes and nostrils. The Midgard Serpent vomits a flood of venom that covers the land and fouls the air. They cause such devastation that the heavens are torn in two.

Through the breach created by Fenrir and Jormungand come the Fire Giants of Muspelheim, led by their king Surtur. Wreathed in fire and wielding a sword brighter than the sun, Surtur destroys the rainbow bridge as his forces ride over it.

Heimdall, the god who watches over the rainbow bridge, sounds the horn Gjallarhorn to raise the alarm. Odin rides to Mimir's Well to consult the oracular head before returning to lead the Aesir into battle. The world-tree Yggdrasil begins to shake, and fear spreads throughout all creation. The final battle is about to be joined.

## The Final Battle

The enemies of Asgard assemble on the field of Vigridr ("Surge of Battle"), which is one hundred *rasts* (almost 702 miles) on each side. Their forces are named as follows:

The wolf Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent Jormungand;

The Fire Giants, commanded by Surtur;

The hordes of Hel, commanded by Loki;

The Frost Giants, commanded by Thrym.

Against them are ranged the Aesir and the *einherjar*, those warriors who were chosen by the Valkyries and brought from the battlefield to Odin's hall at Valhalla, where they have spent the ages fighting all day and feasting all night.

The final battle is described as a series of individual combats, in which the gods fall one by one.

Odin, clad in bright mail and wielding his magical spear Gungnir, fights the wolf Fenrir. Thor stands beside him, but is locked in battle with the Midgard Serpent and unable to prevent Fenrir from slaying Odin.

Frey, the god of peace and fertility, faces the Fire Giant king Surtur, and is overcome after a fierce battle. It is said that Frey might have defeated Surtur if he had had his magical sword, which is capable of fighting on its own. However, he had lent it to his servant Skirnir, and falls before Surtur's fiery blade.

One-handed Tyr battles Garm, the monstrous dog that guarded the entrance to Hel, and they are both killed in the conflict.

After a hard struggle, Thor succeeds in killing the Midgard Serpent. However, he has little time to enjoy his victory. Overcome by the floods of venom that the dying Jormungand vomits forth, Thor staggers back nine paces and falls dead.

Meanwhile, Fenrir has swallowed Odin. Vidar, Odin's son by the giantess Gridr, steps forward and pries the wolf's jaws apart, tearing him to pieces (or, according to the *Voluspa*, stabbing him in the heart). Heimdall fights with Loki, and they kill each other.

As Fenrir, Loki, and Heimdall fall, Surtur flings fire over the earth, and the whole universe is consumed in the conflagration.

Thor fights the Midgard Serpent at Ragnarok. Book illustration by Charles Edmund Brock, 1930.  
(The Bridgeman Art Library)



## The New Age

After the flames subside, a new world, pleasant and fertile, will rise from the sea. Six gods are named as surviving Ragnarok: Vidar and his brother Vali, Thor's sons Modi and Magni, and the two dead gods Balder and Hod, who are released from Hel in this new age. They dwell peacefully in the plain of Ida, where Asgard formerly stood.

Lif and Lifthrasir emerge from the forest and feed on the morning dew. Their descendants will spread across the earth. A daughter of the sun, more beautiful than her mother, will take her place in the sky and bring light to the world.

It appears that these few are not alone in this new world. The righteous dwell in Gimle, where good and plentiful drink awaits them in the hall of Brimer. Snorri equates this with the Christian heaven. Another hall, made of red gold and called Sindre, stands on the Nida Mountains to the north, in what used to be the cold and gloomy realm of Niflheim.

However, all is not peace and plenty in this new world. The terrible hall of Nastrond (shores of the dead) is the abode of perjurers, adulterers and murderers. Its doors face north, letting in a bitter wind. Its walls are woven of living snakes that continually belch forth venom and those inside are forced to wade through streams of the poison.

Hvergelmir ("bubbling, boiling spring") is said to be even worse. Set in the former realm of Hel, it is inhabited by the terrible dragon Nidhogg, who sucks on the corpses of the dead.

# OTHER LEGENDS

The previous chapters have covered the major legends in which Thor appears, but there are others. For the most part they are shorter, and some consist only of passing mentions of his name and his deeds. They are gathered together in this chapter for the sake of completeness.

## The Birth of Sleipnir

Thor plays a peripheral role in the legend that tells how Odin got his magical eight-legged steed Sleipnir, which is told in the *Gylfaginning*.

When the gods were first building Asgard, a builder came to them and offered to build a wall that would keep the realm safe from the giants. As his payment he demanded Freyja, the beautiful goddess of love and fertility, plus the sun and the moon.

After some discussion the Aesir agreed to his terms, but only if he could complete the work within one winter: if any work remained undone on the first day of the next summer, he would forfeit all payment. The unnamed builder replied that in order to complete the work in such a short time he would need the help of his horse Svaldfari (“unlucky traveler”), and at Loki’s urging, the Aesir agreed.

Work started on the first day of winter, and Svaldfari hauled such immense quantities of stone that the Aesir began to worry. The work progressed rapidly, and with three days left until summer everything was complete except for the gateway. Faced with the prospect of losing Freyja and plunging the world into darkness by giving away the sun and the moon, the Aesir met to discuss their options.

At first they looked for someone to blame. It was decided that since the trickster Loki was well known for giving bad advice – he had, after all, urged the Aesir to agree to the builder’s horse – the situation must be his fault. Threatened with a painful death if the building work was completed on time, Loki promised to make sure the Aesir were not compelled to make good on their bargain.

Turning himself into a mare, Loki distracted Svaldfari from his work and the two ran off together into the woods. The builder chased after them, wasting a great deal of time, but was unable to recover his horse. To make up the lost time, the builder grew to an enormous height. He was no ordinary man, but a giant in disguise. He had only felt safe coming to Asgard because Thor was away on one of his giant-slaying expeditions to the east.

Using his giant-strength, the builder resumed work, determined to finish on time and win the goddess and the two lights of the sky. However, when the Aesir saw the giant's true nature they decided to disregard their agreement with him. They called upon Thor, who came back to Asgard right away and shattered the giant's skull with his hammer.

It was from Loki's dalliance with Svalfari while in mare-form that Odin's horse Sleipnir was conceived.

## The Death of Balder

Odin's second son Balder was the most beautiful of the Aesir, and dearly loved by his mother Frigga. When both were troubled by prophetic dreams of his death, Frigga went to everything in the world and made each thing swear never to harm her son. However, she overlooked mistletoe: according to different sources, it was either too harmless or it was too young to take the oath.

Discovering this, the jealous Loki had a dwarf named Hlebard fashion an arrow (or a spear in some sources) of mistletoe. When Balder was showing off his new-found invulnerability by having the gods take turns trying to kill him, Loki gave the mistletoe weapon to the blind god Hod. Balder was killed.

Thor appears only in the scene describing Balder's funeral. He blessed the funeral pyre with his hammer Mjolnir. Then, finding a dwarf named Litr was running around his feet, he kicked him into the flames where he was burnt alive. Nothing else is known about Litr; it seems that Thor kicked him purely out of annoyance.

## The Binding of Loki

Eventually the Aesir became tired of Loki and his tricks. Seeing this, Loki fled to the mountains, where he built a house with four doors so that he could see anyone who approached from any direction. In the daytime he would often turn himself into a salmon and hide under a waterfall named Franangursfors, where he spent his time in divination and planning to evade whatever snares the Aesir might set for him.

Loki was making a fishing-net when he saw the Aesir approaching his house. Before fleeing to the waterfall he threw it into the fire, but the wise god Kvasir saw the pattern of the net among the embers and directed the Aesir to make another. This is how fishing-nets were invented. The Aesir threw the net into the water, with Thor holding one end and the rest of the gods holding the other, and dragged it downstream.