

Loki hid between two stones in his salmon-form, and the net passed over him. However, Odin sensed that the net had touched some living being, and the Aesir cast it again. This time, they weighted the bottom of the net so it touched the stream bed at every point, and Loki could not escape.

Loki leaped over the net and swam back to the waterfall. The Aesir split into two groups, one at either end of the net, while Thor waded behind it. When Loki leaped the net a second time, Thor caught him and barely managed to hold onto his slippery salmon-form. Loki would have escaped if Thor had not caught him by the tail, and this is why all salmon have had slender tails ever since.

Loki was bound to a rock using the entrails of his son Nari, which the Aesir magically transformed into iron. Over his face they hung a snake, which continually dripped venom down upon him. He has been there ever since, and will be there until he breaks free at the start of Ragnarok. Loki's wife Siguna catches the snake's venom in a cup, but when she leaves to empty the cup the venom drips onto Loki's unprotected face, causing him such agony that his writhing produces earthquakes.

## The Stone in Thor's Head

During his duel with the giant Hrungnir (See p.33), Thor was struck by a piece of flint that lodged in his head. When he returned to his home at Thrudvang, he was visited by a wise-woman named Groa, who offered to remove it for him.

Groa sang magic songs over Thor until the stone started to become loose. Thor was so happy, expecting that the stone would be out of his head in a moment, that he rewarded Groa by telling her of an adventure he had had with her husband, a hero named Orvandel the Bold.

The *Skaldskaparmal* does not retell the adventure in any detail, but it implies that Orvandel once accompanied the Thunder God on one of his giant-killing expeditions to Jotunheim. Thor carried Orvandel back in a basket, but one of his toes was sticking out and became frozen. Thor broke off the frozen toe and threw it into the sky, where it became a star that was still known as Orvandel's Toe.

Thor would have done better to wait until the stone was completely out of his head before telling his tale: Groa was so enchanted by this news of her husband (whom, Thor assured her, would be returning home before long) that she forgot to finish her magic song, and the flint remains embedded in Thor's head to this day.

For this reason, it is said to be unlucky to throw a piece of flint across the floor, for it causes the flint in Thor's head to shift.

A 10th-century cross from Gosforth in England bearing an image of the bound Loki. (PD-US)



## THOR AND THE DWARF ALVIS

This story, told in the *Alvissmál*, is very different from the majority of Thor's adventures. His adversary is a cunning dwarf rather than a mighty giant, and Thor overcomes him by his wits rather than his strength.

The poem begins when the dwarf Alvis ("all-wise") comes to Thor and claims his daughter's hand in marriage, claiming that she was promised to him earlier. The story of how this promise came about appears to have been lost.

The girl's name is not mentioned in the poem, but Thor is only known to have had one daughter, a minor goddess named Thrud ("Strength"). The same name also belongs to one of the Valkyries, but it is not certain whether this is the same person as Thor's daughter.

Thor initially refuses since he was not at home when the match was made, and as the girl's father he should have been consulted. Alvis persists in his suit, though, boasting that he has traveled through all nine worlds and can answer any question Thor puts to him.

Thor proceeds to question the dwarf about the names of things: earth, heaven, the moon, the sun, the clouds, the wind, the calm, the sea, fire, the forest, the night, seed, and ale. Alvis responds to each question, giving not only the name by which mortals call each thing but adding the names used by the Aesir, the Vanir, the giants, the elves and the dwarves.



Thor questions Alvis in an early 20th-century illustration by W. G. Collingwood. (PD-US)

In the last stanza of the poem, Thor admits that he has never seen such wisdom as Alvis possesses. However, he says, the dwarf has been outwitted: it is dawn, and Alvis is above ground.

In some post-Viking folklore, members of certain nonhuman races – especially trolls – are turned to stone if the sun's rays strike them. Thor seems to be alluding to a similar weakness of the dwarves, although the poem ends abruptly without making this clear.

## The Sayings of Grimnir

Thor does not appear in the *Grimnismál*, but Odin mentions him a few times in his conversation with the evil king Geirroth.

Thor's dwelling at Thrudheim is mentioned by name, and his mansion at Bilskirnir is described as having 540 floors, making it the greatest of all houses.

A few lines later, Odin names three rivers that Thor must wade on his way to the world-tree Yggdrasil where he will "sit as a judge" when "the Aesir-bridge" (Bifrost) burns: this presumably refers to the council of the Aesir after Heimdall sounds the alarm at Ragnarok. The rivers are named as Kormt and Örmt and "the Kerlaugs twain."

These rivers are also mentioned in *Gylfaginning* and *Skaldskaparmál*, where it is said that Thor always wades to the Aesir's meetings at Yggdrasil, preferring not to ride like the other gods.

(Opposite) Siguna protects the bound Loki. Arthur Rackham (PD-US)

# THOR THE GOD

The surviving myths of Thor tell us little about his role in the religion of the pagan Vikings. This is because the surviving sources come from the Christian era and have been purged of religious content. However, there are some traces of Thor the god in the work of chroniclers who viewed the world of the Norsemen from the outside.

## Earliest Traces

The worship of Thor goes back beyond Viking times. Although the Norse religion and its pantheon are best known for their role in Viking culture, they are a continuation of a Germanic religion first reported by Roman writers some 700 years before the first Viking raid struck England.

### *Donar (Germany)*

In the first century AD, the Romans' conquest of Gaul brought them into contact with the Germanic peoples who lived east of the Rhine and north of the Danube. Around the year 98 the historian Tacitus published the *Germania*, an account of the Germanic peoples and their homelands.

In typical Roman fashion, Tacitus sought to describe the gods of the Germans by comparing them to Graeco-Roman deities. He equated Odin with Mercury, Tyr with Mars, and Thor with Hercules, but he does not record their Germanic names. In classical myth, Hercules was famed for his strength and his weapon of choice was a huge club: the parallels to Thor's character and his iconic hammer are obvious.

Twenty years or so later, in the *Annals*, Tacitus again refers to a cult of "Hercules" among the Germanic peoples, mentioning a wood that was sacred to him.

It is from later sources that we learn the Germanic name of this deity. A brooch found in Bavaria bears the runic inscription *Donar*. The brooch dates to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, almost 200 years before the accepted start of the Viking period.

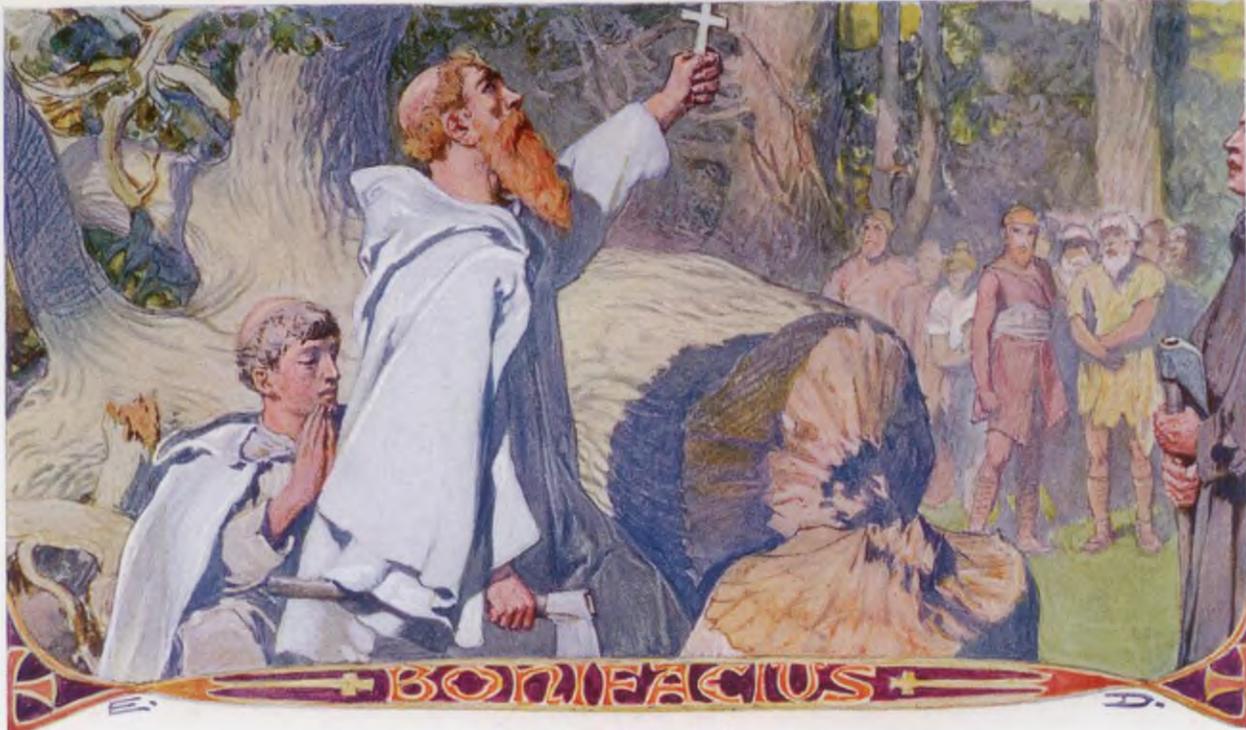
### *Thunor (England)*

The pagan Anglo-Saxons established England ("Angle-Land") after the Roman Empire abandoned Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. They brought their Germanic gods with them from their homelands, including a Thunder

God named Thunor. Place-names like Thundersley in Essex, Thundridge in Hertfordshire, and Thursley in Surrey are thought to be derived from his name. It is also found in Thursday, a day of the week traditionally associated with Thor (Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish Torsdag, German Donnerstag, Dutch Donderdag). Hammer pendants have been found in Anglo-Saxon graves in eastern England, dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Documentary evidence for the worship of Thunor is scant. Like the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons did not make much use of writing until they adopted Christianity. However, a 9<sup>th</sup>-century baptism vow from Old Saxony (now northern Germany) forsakes “Thunaer and Woden” as well as the Devil. The Church must have regarded these two pagan deities as a particular threat to single them out in this way.

Interestingly, an Old English text called *The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturnus* mentions Thunor striking the Devil with a fiery axe. As in post-Viking Scandinavia, it appears that Thor was partially rehabilitated as a hero after the Anglo-Saxons embraced Christianity.



The 8th-century St. Boniface destroyed an oak sacred to Thor. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

## The Viking Thor

Thor the god remains something of an enigma. Although there are plenty of stories about Thor's exploits dating from after the Viking Age, comparatively little is known about how he was worshiped in Viking times.

### *Temples and Sacred Groves*

Archeological traces of Norse temples are rare. There are written accounts of Christian missionaries destroying them, and it is thought that they built churches on the same sites, obscuring or destroying any traces of the pagan temples in the process. The few detailed written descriptions of Norse temples imply that Thor was usually worshiped in conjunction with other major deities, often Odin and Frey.

Sacred groves are reported by many Christian writers. The 11<sup>th</sup>-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen reports one at Old Uppsala, and the Irish king Brian Boru is said to have burned a grove in Dublin that was dedicated to Thor. The size of the grove may be judged from the fact that this task took a month.

Adam of Bremen described a temple at the Swedish capital of Gamla Uppsala (Old Uppsala) around 1070, late in the Viking Age. The temple was adorned with gold and had a golden chain hanging from the gables. Inside was an image of Thor (whom Adam described as "the mightiest"), flanked by images of Odin and Frey.



A 16th-century image of a pagan Norse temple, based in part on the writings of Adam of Bremen. The tree denotes the sacred grove, and the head at the right of the picture may be a sacrificial victim in a spring. (PD-US)

Human and animal sacrifices were hung on trees in a nearby grove. A spring in the grove was used for human sacrifice by drowning. “A living man is plunged into it,” wrote Adam, “and if he does not reappear it is a sign that the people’s wishes will be fulfilled.”

Archeological excavations at Gamla Uppsala have failed to find any trace of the temple and grove that Adam described. Excavations conducted in 1926 found the remains of an earlier structure beneath an 11<sup>th</sup>-century church on the site, but there was no conclusive proof that this was the temple described by Adam.

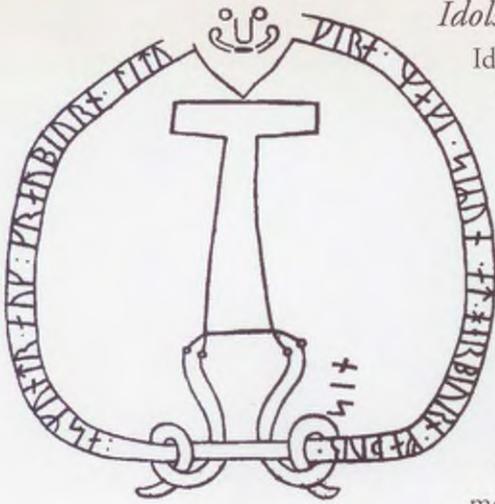
The *Eyrbyggja Saga* tells of a long feud between two Icelandic chieftains in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. It includes a rare Norse description of a pagan temple:

It was a mighty building. There was a door in the side wall, nearer to one end of it; inside this door stood the posts of the high-seat, and in them were nails that were called the Divine Nails. The inside was a very sacred place. Right inside, at the far end, was a chamber, the same shape as a church chancel these days. In the middle of the floor was a stand like an altar, and on this lay an arm-ring, weighing twenty ounces, and all in one piece; men swore all their oaths on this. Also on the stand was the bowl for the blood of the sacrifice, and in it the blood-twig – like a holy-water sprinkler – which was used to sprinkle the blood of sacrificed beasts. And all around the stand the gods (i.e., idols) were set out in that holy place.

## THUNDERSTONES

In Britain and Scandinavia, prehistoric stone axes found in the fields were commonly thought to be thunderbolts that had fallen to earth, splitting trees and damaging houses. A superstition once common in Europe held that one of these stones would protect a house from lightning if it were placed in the chimney, the roof, or under the threshold; the exact location varied according to local tradition.

## Idols



A design on a Swedish runestone shows Thor's Hammer. The face at the top of the image may be of the god himself. (PD-US)

Idols of Thor and other gods are mentioned in several of the later sagas and histories, when Christian kings and missionaries destroy them.

Arabic accounts report that the Rus – Swedish Vikings who traveled east along Europe's great rivers – took idols on their journeys. These were wooden stakes with human-like faces, which could be set in the ground: the Rus prayed to them for success in their business dealings, repaying divine favors with animal sacrifices.

An image of Thor in a temple at Thrandheim, Norway, sat in a chariot drawn by two model goats; the whole construction was covered in gold and silver and mounted on wheels:

Thor sat in the middle [i.e. between the temple's other idols]. He was the most highly honored. He was huge, and adorned with gold and silver. Thor sat in a chariot, and was very splendid. Two goats, very well-wrought, were harnessed in front of the chariot. The chariot and the goats ran on wheels. A rope of twined silver was around the goats' horns, and the whole thing was made with very fine craftsmanship.

The Flateyrbok

## Priests

Norse sources give various names for priests – *godi* and *gydja*, *viðill*, *lytir*, *thulr*, *thegn*, *volva* and *seidmadr* are known – but there seems to have been no professional priesthood. Instead, community leaders such as *jarls* also acted as religious leaders, and were described using one of these terms according to the nature of the religious activity in which they were involved at the time.

## Rituals

Little is known about how Thor was actually worshiped. Various sagas and other literary sources make occasional mention of Vikings praying to Thor for good luck or good weather, and in 876 Danish leaders in England sealed a peace with King Alfred the Great by swearing on “holy rings” associated with the worship of Thor. These may be similar to the arm-ring mentioned in the *Eyrbyggja Saga* above. Several runestones call upon Thor to protect a person or an area, or simply to witness the carving of the runes and the raising of the stone.

However, the sagas do not describe religious rituals in detail – perhaps because the details would have been very familiar to both the writers and their readers and needed no elaboration. Christian writers like Adam of Bremen focus on lurid descriptions of human and animal sacrifice, and say little about other forms of worship.

There were various festivals, or *blots*, throughout the year, but none was specifically dedicated to Thor: the Icelandic festival of Thorrablot seems to have been invented by university students in 1873.

### *Sacrifices*

Adam of Bremen gives a detailed account of pagan sacrifices at Old Uppsala, which is very similar to Tacitus' accounts of German rituals from the *Germania*:

If sickness or famine threaten they sacrifice to Thor; if war, to Odin, and if a wedding is to be celebrated they sacrifice to Frey. There is also a festival at Uppsala every nine years common to all the lands of Sweden. Attendance at this event is compulsory and it is the universal practice for kings and peoples and everyone to send offerings to Uppsala and – a cruel thing – those who have become Christians may secure exemption, but only on payment of a fine. The sacrifice consists of the slaughter of nine males whose bodies are hung in a grove near the temple, a sanctuary so holy that each tree is regarded as itself a deity, in consequence of the death and decay of the victims. Dogs and horses hang there beside human beings, and a Christian has told me that he has seen there as many as seventy-two carcasses hanging there side by side.

### *The Sign of the Hammer*

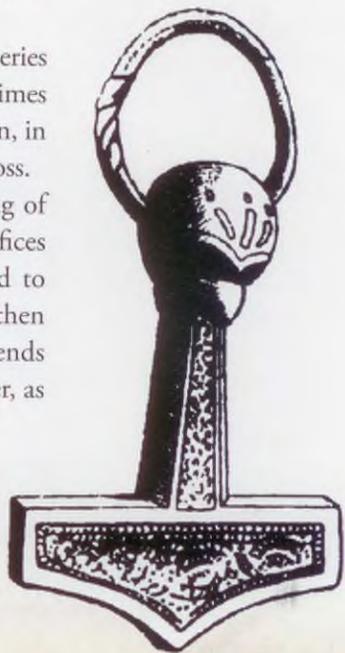
Pendants in the form of Thor's magical hammer Mjolnir have been found across the Viking world. It seems to have been as popular among pagan Vikings as the cross was among Christians. At least one stone mould dating to the Viking Age has impressions of both a Christian cross and Thor's hammer, indicating that the Thor's hammer charm retained its popularity up to – and perhaps beyond – the time when the Vikings converted to Christianity.

Another similarity between the cross and the hammer emerges from a series of references in historical and mythological sources. Pagan Vikings sometimes made a gesture indicating Thor's hammer as a sign of blessing or purification, in much the same way that Christians made, and still make, the sign of the cross.

The *Heimskringla* tells that Hakon the Good, an early Christian king of Norway, was bowed by pressure from his people into making winter sacrifices during a pagan festival at Hlader. When the drinking-horn was passed to him, he made the sign of the cross over it to protect himself from the heathen nature of the proceedings. When eyebrows were raised one of his friends defended him, saying that he was actually making the sign of the hammer, as they were all accustomed to doing.

In the legends, too, Thor's hammer is shown to have the power to deliver blessings. In the *Thrymskvida*, Thor is forced to disguise himself as a bride to recover his stolen hammer, which he does when it is laid upon the "bride's" lap to sanctify the wedding. This suggests a similar practice to the Christian one of using crosses to confer blessings upon rituals and individuals.

A Thor's Hammer pendant from Mandemark, Møn, Denmark. (PD-US)



## *The High-Seat Pillars*

The Ondvegissulur, or high-seat pillars, stood either side of the master's seat in a Viking house. The folklorist H. R. Ellis Davidson suggests that they had a symbolic function linked to the sanctity of the great trees in a sacred grove, or the "lucky tree" which was sometimes planted beside a house to protect it.

It was apparently a common practice for settlers approaching Iceland to throw their high-seat pillars overboard and claim the land wherever they washed ashore. The *Landnamabok* tells of one follower of Thor named Thorolf Mostrarskegg ("most-beard") who packed up a shrine to the god and took it with him to Iceland. Approaching the coast, Thorolf threw the god's high-seat pillars (or perhaps, pillars carved with the likeness of Thor) into the sea instead of his own, letting the god decide where he would reside in this new land. The shrine was rebuilt next to the house, and is described in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*.

## **Thor and Christianity**

The worship of the Norse gods – Thor in particular – died hard in the Viking lands. The Danish archeologist Johannes Brondsted reported multiple stones on which the image of Thor's hammer appeared alongside that of the Christian cross, and images of Thor have been found on carved stone crosses in churchyards in northern England. Many Vikings saw no reason why they should not adopt the worship of "the White Christ" alongside their traditional faith. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Saxon churchman Aelnoth of Canterbury wrote:

As long as things go well, the Swedes seem willing to acknowledge Christ and honor him, but only as a formality. When things go wrong – bad harvests, droughts, storms and bad weather, enemy attacks or fires – they persecute the religion that they pretend to honor with action as well as words.

One Gaukathori, according to the Icelandic *Landnamabok*, "was very mixed in his faith; he believed in Christ, but invoked Thor in matters of seafaring and dire necessity." Gaukathori himself is quoted as saying to King (later saint) Olaf II of Norway: "If I must believe in a god, it is no worse to believe in the White Christ than any other."

Several histories record the efforts of Olaf and various other rulers and churchmen in tearing down the temples of the old religion, including the great pagan temple at Old Uppsala. Christian commentators tried to reconcile the new and old beliefs: the resurrection of Balder was likened to that of Christ, since both marked the beginning of a new age.

There are a few indications that the followers of Thor struck back. Davidson reports that one Icelander told a Christian missionary that Thor had challenged Christ to single combat, while a Norwegian tale tells of Thor taking part in a tug-of-war with Christ's champion, King Olaf Tryggvason.

## Thor in Folklore

Over time, though, Thor and the other Norse gods receded into folklore and fairytales. Jacob Grimm and other 19th-century collectors of folklore recorded that trolls were afraid of lightning, and some tales tell that Thor is still at large, chasing down giants and their kin.

Thor never stopped being a popular personal name, along with compounds like Torsten (“Thor’s stone”), Torvald (“Thor’s ruler”), Torbjorn (“Thor’s bear”), Thordis (“Thor’s goddess”), and Thora (a feminine form of Thor). Place-names throughout the former Viking world begin with Thor-, Tor-, and other elements indicating a connection with the Thunder God.

Thor is also linked to a number of landscape features in northern and western Europe. Here are a few examples, showing the extent of his influence on local folklore.

Thor’s Stone, a house-sized outcrop of red sandstone near the Wirral in Cheshire, England, is surrounded by various local legends which make it everything from the site of a local assembly or *thing* to a pagan altar (the blood of the victims accounting for the stone’s red color) to a fallen thunderbolt to Mjølfnir itself.

Further south, at The Devil’s Jumps near Churt in Surrey, a large boulder by three hills is said to have been thrown by Thor at the Devil, who was annoying him by jumping from one hill to another.

Donderberg (“Thunder Mountain”) near Dieren in the Netherlands is a hill that carries a legend that Donar/Thor crashed his chariot there after being overcome by the Midgard Serpent’s venom at Ragnarok. The crash created two deep lakes, and according to local tradition the hammer Mjølfnir surfaced from the depths when the floodwaters receded.

(Overleaf) Fighting giants is Thor’s favorite pastime. A *kenning* (poetic nickname) for him was “the giant slayer.”



Thor battles the Midgard Serpent in this hand-coloured engraving of Ragnarok. (Charles Walker / Topfoto)