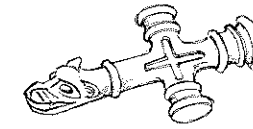


Such are the main sources of Norse mythology. There are many others, some minor in the amount of information preserved though they may be major in its importance. To take two examples: as well as the *Prose Edda*, Snorri compiled a Norwegian history called *Heimskringla*, Circle of the World. This comprises biographies of Norwegian kings from the first 'historical' monarch, Harald, nicknamed the Fine-haired, at the end of the ninth century. Before Harald's story there is a book called *Ynglingasaga*, the History of the Kings of the Yngling Dynasty, and here are tales of legendary kings and some of the gods. When Saxo Grammaticus wrote in Latin his history of Denmark, *Gesta Danorum*, early in the thirteenth century, he built upon a lot of mythological and legendary lore, some of it inconsistent with the material we find in, say, Snorri.

From this mixture of sources from different places and times, and responding to different literary demands, it is not likely that we shall gain a coherent account of Norse mythology. There is a confusion of tales: some belong in clear sequences, others are apparently scattered aimlessly about. How much is genuine Norse legend, how much literary invention, is hard to tell. What the myths have to do with Norse belief is also a matter of controversy. A myth, we are told, should employ 'some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena'. How far the myths retold here do that is for the reader to decide.



## Aesir, Vanir and a few kings

In the Norse myths there are two groups of gods, the *Aesir* (the singular of this noun is *Áss*) and the *Vanir* (singular *Vanr*). Despite Snorri, the word *Áss* is not derived from *Asia*: that is a typical bit of medieval 'learned' etymology. *Áss* derives from a common Germanic word for 'god'. It has a parallel in Old English *ōs* (a word that survives today only as the first element of masculine personal names like *Oswald*, *Osbert*), and there is a Gothic plural form in a Latin text, *ansis* which is translated *semideos*, 'demi-gods'. *Vanr* is a more problematic word. As the dictionaries admit, 'there is no shortage of etymologies for it', but a tempting one links it with Old Norse *vinr*, 'friend', and Latin *Venus*, 'goddess of physical love'.

The renowned French student of comparative religion, Georges Dumézil, argued that the distinction between the Aesir and the Vanir is an ancient one, to be found in the religions of other Indo-European peoples. The Vanir, he thinks, were originally gods of inferior status, accepted into the superior group only after a period of some conflict. This is certainly reflected in the relationship between the two god types as reported in *Heimskringla*, though there it has become a struggle between neighbouring peoples:

Odin took an army to attack the Vanir. They made a valiant defence of their country, and each side in turn had victory. Each plundered the others' land, doing much damage. And when the two peoples had had enough of this, they set up a peace conference, made a truce, and hostages were exchanged. The Vanir gave their most distinguished men, the rich Niord and his son Freyr. In return the Aesir gave the man called Hoenir, saying he was very proper to have authority. He was a big man, very good-looking. With him the Aesir sent one Mimir, a very shrewd man, and in return the Vanir gave the most intelligent one in their group. He was called Kvasir.

When Hoenir came to Vanaland, he was given authority at once. Mimir taught him everything he should say. And when Hoenir was in attendance at legal moots and gatherings without Mimir at hand, and any difficult case came before him, he always gave the same answer. 'Let someone else decide', he would say. Then the Vanir suspected that the Aesir had tricked them over the hostage agreement. They seized hold of Mimir, cut off his head and sent it to the Aesir. Odin picked it up, smeared it with herbs so that it would not rot, and chanted spells over it. This gave it such power that it spoke to him, telling him many occult secrets.

Odin set up Niord and Freyr as sacrificial priests, and they were cult-leaders among the Aesir. Niord's daughter was Freyia. She was a sacrificial priestess. She was the first to teach the Aesir the practice called *seiðr* [magic] which was common among the Vanir. When Niord lived among the Vanir he had mated with his own sister, for that was legal with them. Their children were Freyr and Freyia. But among the Aesir it was forbidden to mate within this degree of kindred.

Much of this legend is confirmed by allusions in Eddic verses. In the poem *Vafþrúðnismál* the question is asked: 'Where did Niord come from to live among the sons of the Aesir? He controls hundreds of shrines and temples, yet he wasn't born among the Aesir.' The answer is given: 'The wise powers created him in the land of the Vanir, and gave him to the gods as hostage. At the end of the world he will return again to live among the wise Vanir.'

For all the best scandal about the gods, turn to *Lokasenna*, where the insults traded between Loki and his opponents usually reveal some disgraceful act or practice of one or the other. Niord has boasted of his son, loved by all and a prince among gods. Loki retorts:

'Stop it, Niord. Control yourself.  
I won't hide this any longer.  
That son of yours you begat on your sister,  
And that's no less than expected.'

When Freyia intervenes, Loki lashes out at her:

'Shut up, Freyia. I know you in full.  
You're not exactly free from fault.  
All the Aesir and elves who are in this hall,  
All have been lovers of yours.'

And in his next riposte, he accuses her of being caught in the act with her own brother.

In these verses the distinctive character of the Vanir is affirmed – distinctive but rather sinister, or at least unorthodox. The practice of *seiðr*, for instance, was useful but could be dangerous. It was a form of magic that gave its practitioners power, either to harm others or to achieve esoteric knowledge. Snorri says that Odin knew it, presumably taught by Freyia:

Odin had that skill – indeed he practised it himself – which brought with it great power. It was called *seiðr*. By using it he could learn the fates of men and events still in the future. He could bring death, ill-fortune or sickness to men, or take intellect or strength from one and transfer it to another. But this sorcery, when it was performed, carried with it such effeminacy that it was thought shameful for men to have anything to do with it. So its practice was taught to the priestesses.

In the main, however, the Vanir brought benefits to mankind. Dumézil sees them as 'givers of health, youth, fecundity and happiness'. He speaks of twin deities, and we can think of Freyr and Freyia as twins (as well as mates). Niord too should have a twin sister (and mate), and she can perhaps be traced, though not precisely in Norse myth. Tacitus, the first-century Roman historian, reported a goddess worshipped by Germanic tribes of the North Sea neighbourhood. She was called Nerthus (an exact cognate of the name Niord), which Tacitus glossed as 'mother earth'. She brought peace and fertility to her devotees. Within the Norse sources, Niord is a god of wealth, rich lands, mercantile enterprise and fisheries. Freyr is god of favourable weather and so of produce, of peace and prosperity, and his appropriately virile statue



A phallic figurine from Rällinge, Sweden, perhaps representing the fertility god Freyr.

in the great temple of Uppsala was invoked for fruitful marriages. Freyia 'is very fond of love songs. It is a good thing to pray to her in affairs of the heart.'

Because of the central importance of such themes to daily life in the Middle Ages, there must have been many myths of these Vanir gods, but surprisingly few of them survive. Of some we have hints. For instance, Freyia was married to a little-known god Od, who went off on his travels leaving Freyia weeping. Thereafter she went in search of him, taking upon herself a variety of strange names. There were presumably stories of her adventures, but there survive only a few allusions in Snorri and the poets. When Freyia wept for Od, her tears turned to gold, so a group of kennings for gold includes 'Freyia's weeping', 'the thawing of the eyelid of Freyia', and so on.

Most detailed of our records of the myths of the Vanir is that of Freyr's passion for a giant-girl, Gerd, a love-tale appropriate to a god of fertility and physical desire. It is told in the Eddic poem *För Skírnis*, Skirnir's Journey, and paraphrased in Snorri's *Edda*. Odin has a great throne, Hlidskialf, from which he can survey all worlds. One day Freyr climbed into it and was punished

for his presumption. He looked northwards (and every schoolboy knows that in the north live giants). There he saw the most beautiful girl with shining arms. He fell for her at once and languished, sick for love. Niord, worried at his son's condition, sent for Freyr's squire Skirnir and told him to enquire the reason. Skirnir asked Freyr why he sat moping, appealing to him for the sake of their childhood friendship to reveal his secret. Freyr confessed his love, and begged Skirnir to go a-wooing for him. The journey was likely to be a dangerous one. In recognition of this, Freyr had to give Skirnir his splendid horse and one of his greatest treasures, a sword that would fight of its own accord. Skirnir rode to the giant's dwelling, which was surrounded by howling guard dogs. The shepherd sitting outside advised him against trying to get in. Skirnir persisted. Gerd, following the dictates of northern hospitality, invited him in for a drink of mead, and asked his errand. Skirnir declared Freyr's love, and offered her gifts if she would respond: eleven golden apples and a ring that reproduced itself every ninth night, clear indications of the immense wealth the Vanr had at his disposal. She rejected them; she had enough gold already. So Skirnir resorted to threats, which got more and more outrageous (and to some degree more and more cryptic) until at last she gave in. She arranged a tryst for nine days' time, promising to give herself to Freyr then. Skirnir rode back. Freyr was so eager for news that he was waiting outside. Skirnir gave his message. Freyr's response will smite the heart of all true lovers:

'A night is long. Two are long.  
How shall I last out for three?  
Often a month has gone quicker for me  
Than such a half wedding night.'

For all its obscurities, *För Skírnis* relates one of the more transparent of Norse myths. The name Gerd has been linked to the common Old Norse noun *garðr*, 'enclosed plot, field' (as in the modern dialectal and specific English word 'garth'), and the coupling of Freyr and Gerd is seen to be an expression of the sacred marriage of the god of fertility to the cultivated land. Ultimately *För Skírnis* has a happy ending. But it is left to the sardonic Loki to point out the implications in a typical stanza in *Lokasenna*:

'You had Gymer's daughter [Gerd] bought with gold;  
That's what you gave your sword for.  
But when Muspell's sons ride across Mirkwood,  
You wretch, you won't know what to fight with.'

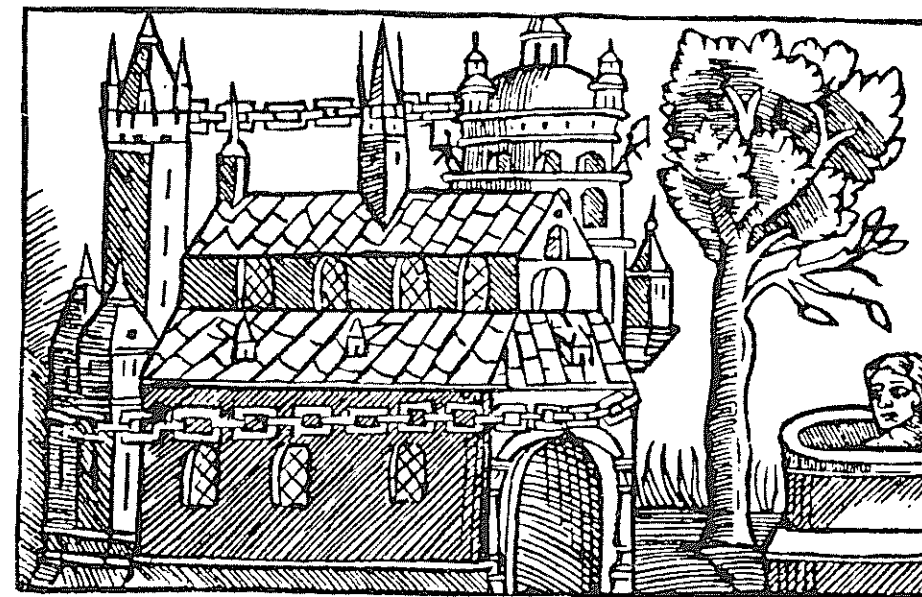
Muspell's sons will be part of the destroying host to attack the gods at the world's end. Freyr will fight to protect the gods, but how can he without the wondrous sword that he gave up in a moment of passion?

Next, a significant tale about Freyr, whose implications are, however, questionable. It comes from Snorri's *Heimskringla*, and so treats Freyr as though he were an early king, not a god; another aspect of that writer's euhemeristic approach to the pagan Norse deities. This affects the story's

content. Niord and Freyr are defined as successive kings of the Swedes. Freyr was very popular; in his days harvests were good and there was a long-standing peace, which the Swedes attributed to their king. He established the great temple at Uppsala, applying to it all the money paid in taxes and tribute.

Freyr fell sick, and as the illness gained on him, his men considered what policy to follow. They let few people come near him, and they built a great mound, put a door in it and three windows. When Freyr was dead, they carried his body secretly into the mound, and told the Swedes he was still alive. There they kept him for three years. All the tax money they emptied into the mound, gold in at one window, silver at the second, and the bronze coinage at the third. The period of peace and fertility continued ... When all the Swedes realised that Freyr was dead, yet peace and good harvests still went on, they concluded that so it would be as long as Freyr remained in Sweden, so they refused to cremate him. They called him *veraldargoð*, 'the god of worldly things', and ever afterwards sacrificed to him for peace and good harvests.

Certainly there are some elements in this story – the riches, the fertility – that are characteristic of the god Freyr's adventures, but in fact it is a celebration of kingship as well as godhead. After all, the name *Freyr* was originally a common noun meaning 'lord', related to the Old English word *frea*, used of both earthly and heavenly kings. It seems from the later medieval tales that early Scandinavian kings were revered in proportion to their ability to bring their peoples the blessings of peace and prosperity, to secure productive seasons for crops and cattle. According to some legendary accounts kings who failed in this were killed off. One such wretch, recorded in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, was the fugitive Swedish king Olaf, nicknamed the Trec-trimmer because he fled to the west of the country and vigorously cleared



A reconstruction of the temple at Uppsala, from Olaus Magnus' *History of the Northern Peoples* published in 1555.

the forests and tilled the land. Other exiles, seeing how fertile the soil was, joined him:

And such a flood of people poured into his territories that the land could not support them all. So there arose great famine and starvation. The Swedes put this at their king's door, because Swedes make a practice of attributing to their king both good seasons and bad. King Olaf was not one for celebrating sacrifices. The Swedes took a poor view of this, thinking it was the cause of the famine. So they gathered together in a band and suddenly fell upon Olaf. They caught him in his house and burnt him in it. Thus they gave him to Odin, sacrificing him to get themselves a good harvest. That was by Lake Vänern.

In his tale of Freyr, Snorri told a royal story which is also a religious one. It resembles an anecdote Saxo Grammaticus tells of the Danish king Frothi, also famed for the long period of peace he brought his people. When Frothi died his retainers wanted to keep it secret so that the land's tranquil condition would remain. They embalmed the body and had it carried round the countryside in a litter, as though the king were too infirm to travel in any other way. Only when the body began to putrefy did they give it proper burial.

This too looks like a transformed religious myth. The name *Frothi* may be related to the adjective *fróðr*, 'fruitful, fertile'. His posthumous progress through the countryside (perhaps to bring an abundant harvest) can be likened to that of Nerthus, *terra mater*, mother earth, in Tacitus's account:

In an island of the ocean is a sacred grove, and in it a consecrated cart covered with a drape. One priest only is allowed to touch it. He becomes aware that the goddess has entered her sacred chariot, and he attends her with great reverence as she is drawn along by her heifers. Then the days are full of rejoicing; the places she thinks worthy of her visit are in festive guise. No-one goes to war. No-one bears arms. All steel is locked away. Only then are peace and tranquillity recognised, only then loved, until the same priest returns the goddess to her temple, having had her fill of human society. Straightaway the cart, the drape, and, if you are prepared to believe it, the goddess herself are washed in a remote lake. Slaves perform this duty, and the same lake immediately engulfs them. From this comes an awesome terror and a feeling of pious ignorance as to what that may be which only those on the verge of death may see.

In turn, the story of a dead king being carried round his realm to ensure that prosperity continued has some little similarity with the tale of the accidental death of the semi-legendary Norwegian king Halfdan the Black, father of Harald the Fine-haired. Snorri tells it in an early section of *Heimskringla*. Halfdan was driving from a feast in Hadeland, and his route took him over the frozen Randsfiord. It was spring and the ice was treacherous. It broke as they were crossing, and Halfdan and all his suite drowned. The bodies were recovered. Halfdan had been a king particularly successful in bringing fertile seasons to his people. The men of Ringerike brought his body home for burial there. To this the people of his other dominions, Rømerike, Vestfold and Heidmark, objected, for they thought that the productive seasons would continue in whatever region the body was entombed. So everybody wanted

it. They came to a statesmanlike compromise, chopping the body into four bits and burying a piece in each of the provinces. Hence, claims Snorri, there are four distinct places in Norway called Halfdan's Mound.

The link of the name *Frothi* with the adjective *fróðr*, 'fertile, burgeoning', suggests that it could be a by-name of Freyr. A chapter in the *Ynglingasaga* of Snorri's *Heimskringla* makes it clear that the two names are intimately linked. Snorri takes Freyr to be a Swedish king, successor to Niord in this office. He describes his rule thus:

He was blessed in friends and fertile seasons as his father had been. Freyr built a great temple at Uppsala, set up his main residence there, and applied to it all his tax-income, his lands and free capital. Then was established the royal treasury of Uppsala, which has continued ever since. In Freyr's days there began 'the peace of Frothi', when there were also fertile seasons in all lands. The Swedes attributed this to Freyr.

Peace and fertility are closely linked in Norse phrase, for it is common to read of sacrifices made *til árs ok friðar*, 'for fruitfulness and peace'. The primitive cult of Nerthus, as we have seen, was also one of peace. Place-names and early references in the sagas confirm this connection between the Vanir and fertile peacefulness. Freyr's name is quite common in Norwegian and Swedish place-names with second elements with meanings like 'meadow', 'field', referring, I suppose, to pieces of land producing rich crops. Niord and Freyr were both wealthy. Indeed, Snorri (or rather High in *Gylfaginning*) says that Niord 'is so rich and blessed with property that he can give wealth of land or of cash to anyone who appeals to him for it'. Freyr owns important treasures like the boar Gullinbursti which lightened darkness with the glitter of its golden bristles. He has a ship with enviable qualities: it can accommodate the whole Aesir band with weapons and armour, it can draw a favourable wind the moment the sail is hoisted, and it can be taken from the sea when not in use and folded up like a cloth and put into a pouch. Freyr's father too had a link with ships and the sea.

For all their differences, the tales of Freyr, Frothi, Halfdan (and in a different mode Nerthus) have common elements, themes that can be supported in different degrees by other early Scandinavian and indeed Germanic stories, that of Olaf Tree-trimmer being only one. The themes are: a deity/king who provides peace and plenty for a people; rich harvests which are connected in popular thought with the continuity of possession of his body, to ensure which abundance the deity/king travels about his realm in a carriage.

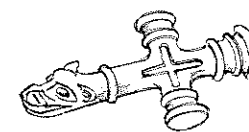
Behind legends like these lies some common Scandinavian or probably Germanic myth, and perhaps even some religious ritual derived from it. The Vanir were clearly important deities in the practical concerns of Norse religious activity. They supplied and controlled the wealth on which Norse society, agricultural and mercantile, depended. Not surprisingly, therefore, they are often named as gods to whom sacrifices were dedicated. Paradoxically, it may be this very practical importance that accounts for the comparatively few myths that survive about a major group of gods like this. The twelfth-



The three great gods in the temple at Uppsala. Thor sits in the middle with Odin to his left. Freyr should stand to his right, but the goddess Frigg has been placed there in error. Again from Olaus Magnus' *History of the Northern Peoples*.

century historian Adam of Bremen compiled a description of the great heathen temple at Uppsala, and the rites conducted there. Within the temple were three major images of gods; one of them, called by Adam *Fricco*, was certainly Freyr, 'doling out peace and delight to mortals'. Adam gives a short account of the great spring sacrifices, but adds disappointingly: 'The chants that are usually sung in the observance of such celebrations are various and unsavoury, so it is best to say nothing about them'.

Inevitably, pagan observances shocked Christian writers and they preferred not to speak of them. If the rites were those of deities who influenced the daily round of life, the economics of agriculture or cattle-raising, the success of trading voyages or fishing, they would be the more dangerous in a proto-Christian society; people would want to carry on with them since the continuity of their communities depended on their success as farmers or seamen. That made it more important for professional Christians to ensure that these gods of the countryside and of the sea were suppressed and their myths forgotten or replaced by Christian equivalents.



## Odin and Thor

The two most famous and powerful of the Aesir, Odin and Thor, stand in sharp contrast to one another: Odin, god of poets and kings, of warriors, of magic; and Thor who appealed to the everyday Viking, the Icelandic or Norwegian man-in-the-fiord. Dumézil viewed the two as types and classified them accordingly. In his division of gods into functions and constituencies, he sees Odin as sovereign god, as king, priest, magician. Thor, he thinks, exhibits the features of the warrior god, one essentially tough and aggressive. There is something in this distinction, though it is simplistic as applied to Viking Age myth or belief. Certainly Thor fights to save the gods from their mortal enemies, the giants; but Odin too has close links with battle, protecting his chosen champions and ultimately gathering them to himself.

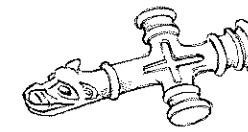
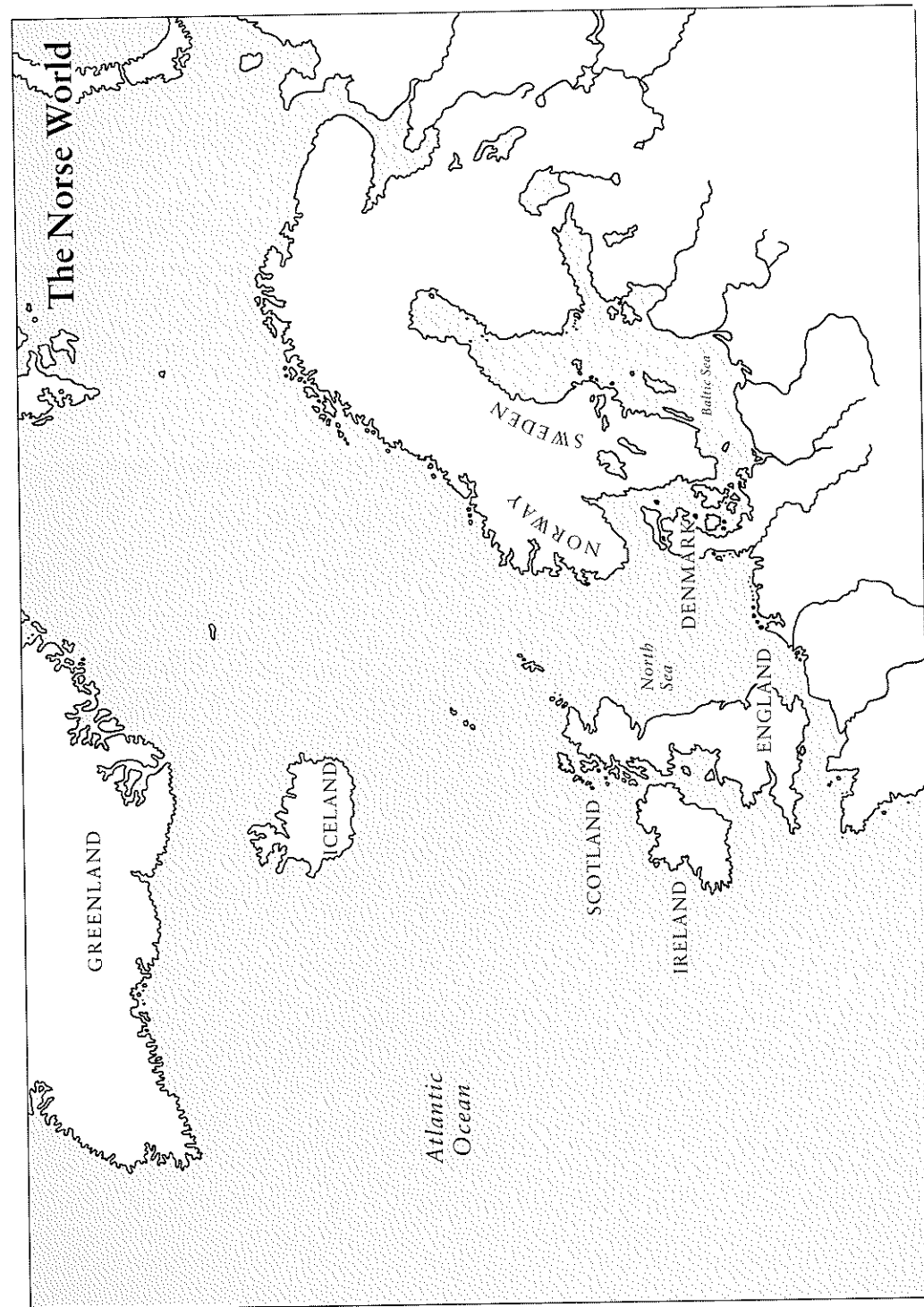
### Odin

Of the two, Odin was far the more complex in character. This complexity arose, some scholars think, from the circumstance that over the centuries Odin took to himself characteristics and areas of activity that had earlier belonged to other gods. The variety of Odin's nature is mirrored by the large number of names applied to him, names that are not quite nicknames but have something of that quality; what the Norse called *heiti*, a noun related to the verb *heita*, 'to be called'.

Snorri, this time as Third in *Gylfaginning*, says that Odin is the oldest and the most eminent of the gods, in control of all things. The other gods obey him as children do their father – this, of course, was many years ago. Third also calls him *Alföðr*, All-father, but he also names him Father of the Slain (*Valföðr*), God of the Hanged (*Hangaguð*), God of Captives (*Haptaguð*), God of Cargoes (*Farmaguð*), and, he adds, Odin gave himself even more names on his visit to King Geirroð. Third then quotes a verse list from the poem *Grímnismál*:

'I call myself Grim	Thunn, Unn,
And Ganglari,	Helblindi, Har,
Herian, Hialmberi,	Sann, Svipall,
Thekk, Thrídi,	Sanngetal ...'

And so on for another sixteen lines. No wonder Ganglari bursts out in reply:



## Introduction

A myth, says the *Oxford English Dictionary* profoundly, is 'a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena'; it adds more cheerfully that the word is often used vaguely 'to include any narrative having fictitious elements'. In this book I use 'myth' neither as loosely as in the second of these definitions nor as rigorously as in the first. Certainly most of the tales retold here deal with supernatural persons and actions, and so provide a guide to pagan Norse thinking as reported by medieval writers. But not all the stories are purely fictitious. Some of those in the final chapter, treating of battle, murder and sudden death in a heroic society, have an origin in historical event, though distant. However, most chapters contain myths of the gods and goddesses of pagan Viking Scandinavia. Some of these clearly embody ideas about natural phenomena (and hence, I suppose, the reason for their creation); these are likely to appeal to readers engaged in modern cults of mysticism. Other stories may also have done this, but they are opaque, and I, not being an anthropologist or folklorist, can only guess at what the ideas were. Others again look to us now like tales told for pleasure, and that is presumably what most modern readers will take them as.

From the records that survive it is clear that the Norsemen had many gods and goddesses. Some of them are hardly known to us, as Ull, splendid archer, ski-champion and fighter, and Var, the goddess 'who takes note of oaths and specific agreements made between men and women ... and wreaks vengeance on people who break them'. Such deities are little more than names to modern readers, though in their day they, like their fellow-gods, may have had myths told of them. Inevitably, however, the body of this book records the myths of the great gods and goddesses of Scandinavia, though we should always keep in mind that what survives may be only a small, and is certainly a random, sample of what once existed.

Best known are the gods of the race of Aesir, one of the two main groups of gods in the Norse pantheon. Leading them is **Odin**, universal father, god of poetic inspiration, of mystery and magic, patron of warriors. He was married to **Frigg**, goddess who knows the fates of all men. Other gods are often referred to as Odin's children. First is **Thor**, a warrior god, defender of the Aesir against their natural enemies, the giants. He married **Sif** about whom little is known save that her hair was of gold. Other sons of Odin