The Dying God: Crash Course World Mythology #19

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're going to talk about the dying god, a specific archetype of god that might seem counterintuitive considering lots of the myths we've already talked about feature gods who are immortal.

The dying god trope, though, is one found in many regions throughout the world, but especially in the Greco-Hellenistic-Roman, which includes Egypt. Don't worry though, Thoth is fine. He's just more of like a death secretary. Alright, let's go.

[Opening music]

The dying god is, you guessed it, a god who dies, and is often, but not always, reborn. Sometimes gods die for the benefit of their people, in which case they're a savior, as we discussed in a previous episode. Other times the god is reborn, actually or symbolically, so these stories also have something in common with the myths that represent regeneration or seasonal rebirth.

In the West, the most well-known story of a dying god is, of course, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. We're not going to get into that one here because it's a widely studied story that y'all are likely familiar with. Instead, let's start with an iconic dying god from ancient Greece, the story of Adonis. Nowadays, calling some dude an Adonis is shorthand for saying that he is super hot, but originally, Adonis was the Greco-Roman version of a Semitic god, sometimes identified with Osiris. In Semitic languages like Hebrew, Adonis's name is Adonai, or Lord, so Adonis's significance goes way beyond killer abs.

In some versions of the Adonis story, his mother was a virgin. In others, he's the result of incest between his mother and her father, a king. Still other versions claim that Adonis may have been born out of a myrrh tree. So for those of you keeping track at home, we've had several brain babies, a thigh baby, one stone baby, and now, our first tree birth.

Probably the best known version of the Adonis myth comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which details Venus's mad love for the beautiful young god. However, we can't give Adonis all the credit. Venus only fell for him after one of Cupid's arrows grazed her breast. She leaves Olympus to chase Adonis around the woods. She warns him not to be too risky in his hunting, but, as you can probably guess, Adonis does not listen. He's killed by a boar that gores him in the groin. Yeowch!

When she finds him dying, Venus is distraught. Ovid writes that she ripped "her garments, tore her lovely hair and bitterly beat her breast," and vowed, "memorials of my sorrow, Adonis, shall endure; each passing year your death repeated in the hearts of men shall re-enact my grief and my lament. But now your blood shall change into a flower." Brutal. Venus, history's first black metal lyricist.

She then sprinkles nectar on Adonis's blood and it transforms into a red anemone flower. This flower is born, lives, dies, and is reborn again each year, like flowers do, so it's a symbolic reminder of the cyclical nature of the seasons, and perhaps our grief. Thoth! You getting all misty-eyed? Or is it just allergies?

Seeing the same flower die every year might be kind of sad, but in another way, it's a hopeful symbol for the idea that maybe death isn't final after all.

Now let's turn to one of the most famous dying gods, our friend Odin who hanged himself from the world tree, Yggdrasil, as a sacrifice in order to gain the knowledge of runes. He doesn't really "die" in most versions of the myth, but he does suffer, both from hanging and from being pierced in the side with a sword. Note the parallels with the death of Jesus here. #dyinggods

There's also Baldur a Norse god who actually does die. Like Adonis, Baldur is often described as beautiful an beloved by all the gods - except of course, for Lokie who as I may have mentioned is: the worst. Loki was jealous of Baldur's popularity and schemed to have him killed by the one thing he was vulnerable to - you're not gonna guess what it is! - it's mistletoe. So think of that at the next office Christmas party, hm?

His mother Frig had gotten every substance on earth to swear not to bring harm to Baldur, except for mistletoe because she thought that it didn't matter. Loki crafted a dart from mistletoe and got the blind god Höðr to throw it at Baldur while everyone else was having fun throwing stuff at him, because he's invulnerable. Norse gods sure do know how to party.

Baldur dies and goes down to single hockey stick Hel, the place. His mother asks for volunteers to try to bring him back, and Baldur's brother Hermod steps up, saddles up, and rides down to Hel. Hel, the person, who minds Hel, the place, isn't particularly moved, but as underworld gods are often want to do, she decides to make a deal. She says that if everyone on earth will weep for Baldur, then she'll let him return.

Turns out, Baldur was so beloved that everyone and everything on earth did weep for him, except for one giantess named Thokk, who says "Thokk will weep dry tears over Balder's funeral. I never cared for the old man's son - alive or dead, I have no use for him. Let Hel hold what she has." Harsh, Thokk. What did Baldur ever do to you? Geez.

So Baldur doesn't come back from the dead, all because of Thokk. Though, if you ask the other gods, they'll point out something very interesting: isn't Loki (who's the worst) a shape-shifter? And have you ever seen him and Thokk in the same room? Just saying, these are the reasons Loki is the worst.

Far from bring a bittersweet reminder of life's impermanents, Baldur's death foreshadows Ragnarok, the literal death and rebirth of everything. More on that in a few episodes, if the world doesn't end.

The story of the corn mother; a great goddess from Native American mythology is one where the dying god specifically makes sacrifices in order to bring salvation to her people.

Thought Bubble, this one's a little grisly, but we think you can handle it.

The first mother was born from a drop of dew during the time where the All-Maker was creating all sort of things. She was a beautiful young women who upon being born proclaimed: "I am love, a giver of strength. I will provide for people and animals and they will all love me."

All-Maker certainly loved her and together they born the first people. Following All-Maker's instructions the people learned to hunt. In time, they became so good at it that they exhausted all the game on the earth. Then, the people began to starve and this made the first mother sad because she had made the people and now couldn't do anything to help them. Her husband didn't want to see the first mother so sad and asked what he could do to stop her weeping.

The first mother replied wih the only thing he could do: kill her. Her husband refused at first, but eventually he relented and asked the first mother how he should do it. The first mother told him that when the sun was at it highest point, he should kill her and have two of her sons drag her by the hair over the barren earth until the all the flesh has been scraped from her body. Then they were to take her bones and bury them and wait seven mouths before returning. At

this time, the mother's flesh would feed the people.

The husband and sons did what the first mother said and waited sadly for seven months to return to the place where the first mother's flesh had been stripped from her bones. There, they found plants with tassels of hair, silky like the first mother's, and sweet fruit that they could eat. This was corn and as the first mother promised, it fed the people from now on. Her sacrifice being being repeated and renewed every seven months.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

After the discovery of corn, the people of earth went back to the place where they'd buried her bones and they found another plant with sacred leaves that when burned would clear their minds and help them with their prayers. This was tobacco, so thanks? Yeah that one is a lot more tricky. Just ask, well we are gonna get to trickster gods in the nest episode.

So the first mother, now called the Corn Mother, saved the Native American people from starvation. There's an amazing blend of archetypes in this story. Obviously there is the earth mother who gave birth for humanity, and cares for them. Like human mothers, she weeps for her helplessness when her children suffer and she is willing to sacrifice anything, including her body so that her children can survive.

In this sacrifice she also plays the role of the savior, which is typically a role performed by male gods in myths. The Corn Mother is also a culture hero; her sacrifice transforms a hunting people into an agricultural people, though many Native Americans in North America pursued both hunting and agriculture simultaneously, as a means of subsistence.

The Corn Mother providing an alternative form of food enabled the animals to recover, providing game for the people. And in addition to providing food, the Corn Mother gave the people tobacco, which became an important part of their religious ritual and other practices.

Many of the dying god stories involve cycles, whether it's Adonis and the annual flower or the Corn Mother and the annual harvest. These stories remind us that birth is often twinned with death, which may make the latter's inevitability easier to accept. And the Corn Mother story adds an extra layer in reminding us that motherly sacrifices enable all life.

We've seen the idea of gods sacrificing themselves as the foundation of creation before. Tongu's body became the earth, the body and bones of Ymir became the earth and the mountains and his skull became the sky. Gaia gave birth to the mountain and the oceans. It's not surprising that throughout most of human history, when child birth was much more likely to end in the mother's death, that we find stories where gods sacrifice themselves so that humans can live.

Thanks for watching, we will see you next time.

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Thanks for watching, and hey - Baldur does not appreciate your jokes.