The Norse Pantheon: Crash Course World Mythology #10

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta and this is Crash Course Mythology.

Today we're gonna try to do justice to the Norse Pantheon - a very scary wolf, an amazing tree, a rainbow bridge, some frost giants, and way more than what I learned from reading Thor comics. No, no, no, no, not you, Thoth, your 'th' is plosive, we're talking voiceless dental fricative here. Thor. You know this joke might work better in print.

[Opening music]

We met some of the Norse gods when we looked at one of their creation stories. The source for that myth and many other stories from Norse mythology is the *Prose Edda*, an Icelandic compendium written by the amazingly named Snorri Sturluson around 1220 CE. This means that one of our main sources for the tales of Germanic and Scandinavian gods and goddesses comes from the far edge of their world. It's also important because the *Prose Edda* is relatively new. So one rainbow bridge that we're gonna have to cross here is the way that later Christian ideas influence the existing version of these myths.

Partly because of Snorri, there's a tendency to think of Norse mythology as belonging to Scandinavia, but that's not quite right. The Norse Pantheon has roots in the religion and mythology of Germanic people who migrated into Europe. The Romans, especially our pal Tacitus, recorded what they understood of the Germanic tribe's beliefs, but they translated Germanic gods into their own terms. So Wotan, or Wodan, who we're calling Odin, became associated with Mercury. Tyr, or Tiwaz, a warrior god, became associated with the Roman god of war, Mars, and Thor was Jupiter, or Jove.

In their own terms, these are two sets of Norse deities. First, the Vanir, associated with the earth and fertility. They're the older set of gods. And second, the Aesir, associated with the sky. The Vanir were led by Freyr and Freya, brother and sister and also King and Queen. They were the children of Njord, who also has a terrific name. According to Sturluson, "Freyr is an exceedingly famous god. He decides when the sun shall shine and when the rain come down, and along with that, the fruitfulness of the earth, and he is good to invoke for peace and plenty. He also brings about the prosperity of men." So he is definitely the god that you wanna honor if you're having a picnic. Well, him and Amaterasu, the Japanese sun goddess, and while we're at it, why not also Aphrodite, because everyone has a thing for - you get it.

The Vanir and the Aesir warred, but eventually reconciled and the Vanir came to live in Asgard, one of the nine mythical Norse worlds. Although they also had their own realm, Vanaheim, not to be confused with Anaheim, the realm of Walt Disney, oranges, and online video conferences.

If you want the Euhumerist opinion, or where we take mythology as an explanation of historical fact, this war may reflect a time where there were two competing religions among the tribal people of the North, which eventually teamed up. Vanir and Aesir, stronger together. Like Fultron - but gods.

Another Norse god is Heimdall, also called the White God. He's associated with the sea, because nine waves birthed him. It must have been a very chaotic day at the maternity ward. Heimdal was the sentry of the gods, and the arch enemy of Loki, who you might know from his role as Tom Hiddleston.

Accordind to Sturluson, "Heimdall needs less sleep than a bird and can see a hundred leagues in front of him as well as by night as by day. He can hear the grass growing on the Earth and the wool on the sheep and everything that makes noise." Boy, poor Heimdall. Imagine going to a dinner party and listening to everyone chew. Some traditions place Heimdall in the Aesir, some in the Vanir.

The Vanir are also associated with a golden boar, said to travel above and below the Earth like the sun. Gullinbursti, as it was called, appeared on warriors' crests and helmets especially in Uppsala. Just like in Greece and Egypt, different gods in the Norse pantheon were worshipped in different regions.

Thor is probably the most famous of the Aesir. Probably the second most famous is Odin, Thor's dad. Odin is the father god, who was associated with war, especially with the raw, almost ecstatic warrior rage of berserkers. He was also a wizard who swayed battles through magic. Imagine like, Gandalf, but with one eye, lots of muscles, and an unhealthy desire for arcane wisdom and a bit of a mean streak.

Odin inherited his warrior-god nature from his Germanic predecessors, Wodan and Tiwaz. As Kevin Crosley Holland remarked, "a culture finds the gods it needs and the Norse world needed a god to justify the violence that was one of its hallmarks."

Basically, if you're a war-like society, a war god is pretty convenient. Odin inspired victory, and forsaw defeat with his shamanistic precognition. He was also the god of poetry, who traveled the the land of the Giants, Jotunheim, to drink the mead of poetry and bring it back to the Aesir and the Vanir. Mmmm...poetry mead.

Another part of Odin's story is his sacrifice and rebirth as a wiser god. According to one version, he hung himself from the World Tree so he could drink the mead of wisdom. I guess Odin couldn't stop himself at just one mead. This was when he sacrificed his eye, too.

Odin was married to Frigg, a goddess who could also see the future. Odin's children were Thor, whose mother was the Earth itself, Baldr, the most beautiful of the gods, who was killed by Hodr, his blind brother, and Tyr, although one source has Tyr's father as the giant Hymir.

In some stories Baldr is a human warrior favored by Odin. Baldr is the wisest of the gods, and the sweetest spoken, and the most merciful. But it is a characteristic of his that once he has pronounced a judgment it can never be altered. Odin has another son Hermod the Bold who was sent to retrieve Baldr from a city in the underworld, Niflheim, ruled by the goddess Hel. Yeah, that's Hel with one single hockey stick, and she was said to be the daughter of Loki, who also helped kill Baldr.

Loki is confusing. It's never clear whether he's a god or a giant or even whether he's good or evil. He's been called the son of two giants, but also the foster-brother of Odin. He's a trickster, so maybe his uncertain pedigree makes some sense. He's also a thief, but also also sometimes helps the Aesir. He's the father of several monsters, including the world serpent - Jormungand, the wolf - Fenrir, and Hel. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Loki is the worst, as we will see in our episode on Ragnarok. The mythical event - not the comic book event, or the movie event, not even the Gwar record. Just the literal end of the world.

Tyr is identified with war and justice. In some traditions, he's also a son of Odin, but as you've probably noticed, it's not exactly easy to pin down parentage in the Norse world. I blame those nine waves. Tyr's position as a god of both war and justice is interesting, given what we learned about Viking's in Crash Course World History. While known for their fearsome raiding Vikings also had a strict legal code, with certain elements of democratic governance. And they were also really into skiing.

There are other gods in the Norse pantheon, but they don't really

feature much. Bragi, a son of Odin, was another god of poetry, while Ull was concerned mainly with archery and hittin' the slopes. Yeah, that's right, there's a god of skiing. There's Vali, Odin's son who avenged Baldr's death and Vidar, son of Odin and the giantess Grid, avenged Odin's death. I'm gonna need an info graphic. Oh, great!

The Norse goddesses are relatively minor figures in the myths. Freya is the only one who seems to have personality. She's a goddess of love, faithfulness to her husband, Freyr, is not her strong suit. Her strong suit is definitely her amazing feather jacket. She also has a cat drawn chariot, that is not a joke. And like Freya, goddess Geifon is one of the Vanir, and she is associated with plowing and fertility. Eir is the goddess of healing, Siofn and Lofn are goddesses of love, Var punishes those who betray their marriage oaths and nothing can be hidden from her. Syn with a y is a goddess associated with justice, and who couldn't love a goddess named Snotra, who is associated with wisdom and self-discipline. And also head colds. I'll be here all week. Snotra stands in contrast with Saga, a goddess of poetry whose main role seems to be Odin's drinking companion. Skål!

Frigg is Odin's wife and a mother of multiple gods, but we don't know that much about her. She's a maternal goddess who mourns the loss of her son Baldur and was invoked by women in labor. Like Odin, she seems to be able to know the future.

Now, on to a myth. I'm gonna be honest - Norse myths are like the frat party of mythology. There's a lot of fighting and drinking and laughing, though there's no beer pong. First, some quick backstory. Odin championed warriors, picking his favorite and sending Valkyries to bring them to Valhalla, which seems like a pretty nifty way to travel.

Thor was the god of farmers, and there were a lot of farmers in Scandinavia. But he was also a mighty warrior. Huge with a giant red beard. Not so bright, but who needs smarts when you're the god of thunder and lightning? He protected the Aesir and Vanir from giants, and in a stunning bit of surely coincidental wordplay, Mjollnir, his famous hammer, was also a symbol of fertility.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

One day, Thor woke up and couldn't find his hammer. He sent Loki to locate it. Loki borrowed Freya's sweet falcon jacket, turned it into an actual falcon, and went searching. He found his way to the hall of the giant Thrym, who said that he had stolen Thor's hammer, wouldn't give it back unless Freya agreed to marry him. Freya said, ver my dead body.

So Heimdall, the sentry god, came up with a brilliant idea: put Thor in a wedding dress and have him pretend to be Freya. The other gods laughed and Thor sulked, but Loki prevailed on him because without his hammer, the gods were vulnerable to giants. So they found a giant wedding dress and a thick veil and headed off to Jotunheim.

Once there, Thrym threw his new bride and her bridesmaid, Loki, a wedding fest. Thor ate an entire ox, eight salmon, all the sweets, and three horns of mead. When Thrym commented that he'd never seen a woman eat so much, Loki explained that Freya was so excited to be married, she hadn't eaten in eight days. Thrym seemed satisfied but then, he peeked under her veil and saw his bride's glowing red eyes. Loki again reassured Thrym his bride was so excited that she hadn't slept for seven days. Finally, Thrym offered Mjollnir as a wedding symbol, saying, "Put Mjollnir between her knees so that Var will hear our marriage oath and give her blessing."

Thor snatched it up, ripped off his veil, and did what he does best - clobbered some giants. He crushed Thyrm's skull and killed every other giant at the wedding feast, including the women. The tale ends, "And so Thor, son of Odin, won back his hammer."

Thanks, Thought Bubble, that was...awesome and disturbing and of course, soaked in mead and blood.

Norse Gods, like Greek ones, are all too human, and they seem to misbehave accordingly, but unlike other mythic traditions, the Norse sagas seem to lean less heavily on metaphor. They're rollicking adventure tales perfect for vikings, lusty warriors who like nothing more than a roasted ox, a few horns of ale, and a good punch up. Oh, and also skiing.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next time.

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Thanks for watching, and just because the world needs more Freya facts: she was also accompanied by a boar named Hildisvíni, which translates to 'battle swine'.