



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# GODS OF THE VIKINGS

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# Gods of the Vikings

## Introduction

The gods worshipped by the pagan peoples of Scandinavia consisted of a full pantheon of supernatural deities. I will refer to these gods as those of the Vikings, rather than referring to them as belonging to the Norse, Danes or Rus.

## Pagan Gods

The gods of the Vikings were also the gods of the pagan Germanic peoples of Europe, including those of the Anglo-Saxons before their conversion to Christianity.

By our modern day standards, it is hard to comprehend that beliefs in these gods was such an integral part of people's lives but before the advent of science, every event had to have an explanation, therefore people looked to these fabled supernatural beings to account for the things that effected their lives and to give structure to a world where disasters and death was common.

The following is only a generic explanation as it is a large and complex subject so any omissions are mine alone but this article is just designed to impart some knowledge of the gods worshiped by the Vikings.

The religion of the Vikings was one that glorified violence and this reflected in the hard lives that most people of the period had to endure. Their religion was polytheistic, with them believing in various types of gods and goddesses. Life was hard. The vast majority of people lived at subsistence levels. Danger abounded. Natural disasters such as famine or manmade events such as raiding were a constant threat. When you have little you have to be prepared to defend and fight for what you had otherwise someone stronger would take it. Therefore a hard life produced hard people and gave rise to ferocity and self preservation. Everyone learned to fight from an early age.

Warfare or raiding offered loot and the opportunity to gain personal wealth so being poor and having little status or opportunity made becoming a raider an attractive proposition. Wealth, reputation and the kudos that came with it made the Viking raiders thirsty for fame and the brutality often used enhanced reputations and created legends amongst their own people and created fear amongst their victims.

## Death in battle

Warriors who died in battle would be taken by the Valkyries to Valhalla where they would feast and fight, be killed and then resurrected in an endless cycle until they would fight for the gods at the final battle of Ragnarok.

If warriors truly believed this, it may account for the reputation that the Vikings were fearless in battle and unafraid to die.

The belief was, that the fate of both the gods and mankind was pre-ordained and is highlighted by the belief that the whole cosmos and mankind would be destroyed, along with the gods, in one last cataclysmic battle with the Frost Giants of the realm of Jotunheim. That battle was Ragnarok.

Once this had occurred, the world would be reborn and two humans would be recreated and they would repopulate the earth.

## Yggdrasil.

The Vikings believed that the cosmos consisted of nine worlds that were connected to the world tree, Yggdrasil. Many creatures such as elves, trolls, dwarves, a dragon, an eagle and other beings lived on the tree and three norns or witches lived beneath the tree roots, where they would cut the strands of life of men in battle and decide the fates of all newborns.

## The realms of the Gods

The gods lived in the realm of Asgard whilst humanity lived in Midgard. Both realms were connected to each other by the rainbow bridge, Bifrost.

The gods themselves were divided into two groups, the Aesir and the Vanir. These two groups had fought an ancient war which resulted in their unification when they accepted that neither side could win. The leader of the Aesir became the most important deity. His name was Odin.

**Odin** was the god of war but also of poetry and magic. He was also known as the all father. Odin had a thirst for knowledge and was accompanied by two ravens and two wolves as well as the valkyries. He was also hung from the world tree, Yggdrasil, for nine days and nine nights in order that he could obtain knowledge of all the nine worlds that surrounded the tree.

His wife was **Frigg** a goddess of beauty, fertility, fate and love.

**Balder** was their son, the god of light and purity. He was thought to be immortal but was killed by mistletoe, by the blind god, Hod, who had been tricked by the mischievous god Loki, into throwing a branch of mistletoe at Balder.

**Loki**, was also called the Trickster and was a shape shifter which he used to mislead people. He was also the father of monsters, such as Fenrir the wolf and the world serpent.

**Thor** was the god of Thunder and was a son of Odin. He was the protector of humanity and he wielded a great hammer called Mjollnir. Many Viking warriors wore an amulet called a 'Thor's Hammer' as personal protection.

**Freya** was also goddess of love and beauty like her mother Frigg and her brother, Frayr was the god of fertility.

**Heimdall**, another son of Odin, was the god who guarded the bridge, Bifrost and who protected Asgard.

**Hel** was the goddess of the underworld, Helheim.

**Vidar** was the son of Odin and of Grid, a giantess. He was as powerful as Thor. He was the silent god of vengeance.

**Vale** was another son of Odin who avenged Balder by killing the god, Hod.

**Tyr** was the god of war. He is often depicted with only one arm as the other was bitten off by the great and monstrous wolf Fenrir. Tyr trapped Fenrir and chained him. Fenrir was to remain chained until the final battle of Ragnarok when he would be set free.

**Bragi** was the bard god of Asgard. He entertained the fallen warriors in Odin's great hall, Valhalla.

**Idun** was the goddess of eternal youthfulness and was the wife of Bragi.

**Njord** was the god of the seas and wealth.

**Sol** or **Sunna** was the goddess of the sun who was chased across the sky and swallowed by the wolf Skoll every day.

**Ran** was the goddess of the sea.

**Sif** was the goddess of the harvest and the wife of Thor.

**Nott** was the goddess of the night.

**Mani** was the god of the moon.

**Nanna** was the goddess of joy and peace.

**Eostra** was the goddess of spring.

**Forsetti** was the god of justice.

**Magni**, the son of Thor was the god of strength.

**Dagur** was the god of daytime.

**Delling** was the god of the dawn.

**Eir** was the goddess of healing.

**Elli** was the goddess of old age.

**Vor** was the goddess of wisdom.

There were many other gods and goddesses, many bearing sons and daughters to giants and other supernatural beings. Other beings such as elves and dwarves were also minor deities who were also likely revered and possibly had shrines dedicated to them.

The mythology of the Vikings mirrors that of Ancient Greece, Rome and many other ancient peoples. There are many parallels between various gods. The names may be different but their roles, functions and powers are comparable. This hints that these pagan religions all had all derived from a common ancient source.

For instance, the Anglo Saxon god, Woden is comparable to Odin, whilst their god of thunder, Thunor is just another manifestation of Thor.

Tiw, the Anglo-Saxon war god compares with the Norse equivalent, Tyr.

Tiw gave his name to the day, Tuesday( Tiw's day) whilst Wednesday is derived from Woden's day.

Easter derives from the name of the goddess Eostra , the goddess of spring.

The Anglo Saxons and the Scandinavian peoples, before Christianity were both Germanic peoples with a common culture and a common religion. They were not so very different.

The religious beliefs of the Vikings and the mythological stories of their gods and deities would have been abhorrent to Christians who are likely to have embellished and exaggerated their pagan beliefs by portraying them as savages who practised abject cruelty and who committed terrible acts.

The practice of Human sacrifice did take place amongst the Vikings and this too, would be seen by the Christians as something Satanic and barbarous.

Were the Vikings savage and barbarous? Yes. Did their religion promote violence?, yes, but my belief is that an Anglo-Saxon warrior was just as ferocious and warlike as any Viking and in battle, just as merciless.