

**Odin and his Brothers:
Common Threads of the Odinic Tradition
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Abstract:

Within the *Poetic Edda* Odin, Lodur (Loki) and Haenir are responsible for the creation of humanity in Nordic mythology. Odin can be seen in an early form as a god of the sky, Loki as a god of fire, and Haenir as a god of water. These gods of creation can be connected to Syrian myth in the case of Vili and Ve (Eilli and Ea) and to Indian myth in the case of Loki and Haenir (Agni and Soma). These associations are reinforced through parallels relating specifically to similarities of the myth of the mead of poetry with that of the soma in the case of the Indian and in the Baldric tradition in the case of the Syrian. There is some potential of establishing a latest possible date for the origin of the myth, as well as an original form of the myth, when common details are identified.

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Odin - God of Wind

The mythological descriptions of Odin come out of the Eddas and Sagas, where he is established as father of the gods, god of the hanged, god of prisoners, god of cargoes, god of runes and poetry (*od*), and most importantly as god of battle and death. Odin might have been associated with battle through his association with the horse, and thus this god became the god of warriors, or through his association with death and the underworld.¹

Like the goddess Hel “Wode also and the wild hunter ride on a *three-legged horse*; Wode catches the subterraneans, ties them together by their hairs, and lets them hang on each side of his horse.” (Grimm 2004: 1556) Sometimes the Devil is described as a hunter in green or goes by the name Greencoat, just as Odin was to have worn a green hat. In Ostgotland the name Oden was used to mean Devil.² (Grimm 2004: 1606) Huntsmen in Germany dressed in green (Grimm Brothers 1997: 208), so Odin’s green hat is a hunting hat: green to blend into the greenery and wide-brimmed to disguise the face from prey.

Some of the gods of the underworld have often also been gods of war. The Valkyries seem little different from the wild women, and were thought to capture the spirits of men and carry them below. Among the Ossetes they have a hunting god named Aef sati, who is “old and bearded and sometimes blind or one-eyed, with beautiful daughters who were sometimes allowed to marry poor huntsmen.” (Davidson 1998: 15) Later, Odin’s realm passed into the

¹ This might be seen as the Sun going down into the underworld at night and its red color at sunset.

² In German fairy tale arises the expressions “ran as if the Wild Huntsman were behind them” which can be compared to “as though the Evil One were at his heels”.

heavens and there was imagined Valhall, were they were served by Odin's maidens, the Valkyries, and beyond which the fallen heroes would fight daily.³

In addition to this textual information, it is also known that Odin's single eye represents the Sun, so he was also a god of the sky. His blue cloak was the blue of the sky and his passage was made swift from the incomparable horse he rode. In *Gesta Denorum* Odin, after saving Hading in flight after military defeat, returns him on his horse:

With these words he set the young man on his horse and brought him back to the place where he had found him. Hading hid trembling beneath his cloak, but in intense amazement kept casting keen glances through the slits and saw that the sea lay stretched out under the horse's hoofs. Being forbidden to gaze, he turned his wondering eyes away from the terrible view of his journey. (Grammaticus 1979: vol. I 25)

Snorri records a poem by Ref where Odin is referred to the "practiced controller of the wave-horse's [ship's] snow-road's [wind's] hall", and "wind's hall" is a kenning for the sky (Sturluson 1987: 68). In "Skaldskaparmal" he is said to ride sea and sky wearing his golden helmet (Sturluson 1987: 77). Odin's name Atridi could mean "the one who rides up" into the sky (Grimm 2004: 1335).

Odin was not only a god of the Sun and sky, but also of the weather. He was called Vidrir as a god of storms, Thund as a god of thunder, and was praised for a favorable wind (Grimm 2004: 882). A howling wind or any such noise was attributed to Odin's wagon (McCulloch 1964: 41). Mountains, often thought to be the origin of winds, were considered sacred to Odin (Grimm 2004: 152). The Germanic god Wotan was a storm god whose name Grimm suggests is related

³ The Lettons used to say when the northern lights shone, "the souls of the fallen warriors are fighting" (Grimm 2004: 940).

to *wetan* (weather) (Grimm 2004: 1327); he was also known as Voma, a word for the sound of wind (Grimm 2004: 162).

The ghostly army at Yuletide called *aaskerieda* comes from *aska* (lightning) and *reid* (thunder), but was also observed when there was a strong storm wind (Grimm 2004: 946). Thus the Wild Hunt was the fury of storm winds.⁴ During calm weather the Furious Host was thought to dwell in a hill (McCulloch 1964: 44).

Odin's Brothers

The trio Odin, Lodur, and Haenir or Odin, Vili, and Ve are the gods responsible for the creation of mankind. Vili and Ve were Odin's brothers, the sons of Bor (Sturluson 1987: 11).⁵ In "Lokasenna", Odin and Loki are said to be blood-brothers and one of the names of Odin is Helblindi, which is also the name of one of Loki's brothers. Loki is referred to as "Haenir's friend" and "Odin's friend", and Haenir is "Odin's table-companion or comrade or confidant" while Loki is "comrade and table-companion of Odin". In a myth from the Faroe Islands the three gods are given as Ouvin, Höner and Lokkji, who hide a boy from a giant, Skruimsli, by putting him in an ear of barley, a swan's feather, and a fish's egg (Grimm 2004: III xl).

There are two accounts given for the creation of mankind by the gods in the Eddas; the first addressed is in Gylfaginning:

⁴ The Indian god Indra was said to be father of the winds and of the dead. They believed that a man's final breath became a part of the wind: "May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature; or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take root in the plants with your limbs." (O'Flaherty 1981: 49)

⁵ In "Voluspa" the sons of Bur are unnamed, but later Odin, Lodur and Haenir are mentioned. There is nothing that implies here that the sons of Bur are not still Odin, Vili, and Ve; Odin, Lodur and Haenir are rather given the role of creating mankind. That Snorri still mentions Odin, Vili, and Ve in this role implies the association as Bur's sons could be assumed.

As Bor's sons walked along the sea shore, they came across two logs and created people out of them. The first gave breath and life, the second consciousness and movement, the third a face, speech and hearing and sight. They gave them clothes and names. The man was called Ask (ash), the woman Embla (elm), and from them were produced the mankind to whom the dwelling-place under Midgard was given. (Sturluson 1987: 13)

The kennings for mankind such as “stave of the sea” and “wide ocean's tree” refer to their creation. Also ‘tree’ or any of various types of trees are used as kennings for man or woman.⁶ The reason for this is because the color of driftwood is very similar to that of white skin, and it also has the shape and roundness of human limbs. The term ‘wooden’ also seems to have been used to mean naked, as it says in *Havamal*:

My clothes I gave along the way
To two wooden men;
Champions they thought themselves when they had clothing,
The naked man is ashamed
(Larrington 1999: 21)

As in Snorri, in “Voluspa” the gods bestow onto lifeless forms the three life-signs: Odin gives *önd*, Haenir gives *ôd*, and Lodur gives *lâ* and *lit* (Grimm 2004: 1449). These correspond to spirit (breath), soul (beating heart and blood), and spark (warmth and complexion). Odin was a god of wind and the lungs were sacred to him. Based upon what they bestow unto man, Lodur then is a

⁶ Among the male trees were the elm, rowan, fir, ash, maple, spruce, pine, apple and birch. Among the female trees were the willow, fir, birch, linden and oak.

fire god and Haenir seems to be a god of water.⁷ Haenir was also known as ‘silent one’, swift, long-legged, and ‘mud-king’ (Sturluson 1987: 76).⁸ The Gothic word for soul, *saivala*, is related to the word for sea, *saivs* (Grimm 2004: 826). The association between water and blood may be given in a verse from *Kormak’s Saga*.

Of little gain in combat	Of little gain in combat
my staff of slaughter proved	my sword proved
when I hewed shield rims; the hand’s	when I hewed shield rims;
sharp-toothed bear charged into battle.	the sword charged into battle.
There was clamor when the bruin of blood,	There was clamor when the sword,
unwilling for truce, left its lair,	unwilling for truce, left its lair,
its slender scabbard, on its way	its slender scabbard, on its way
to the dwelling of the sea-king (Ati). ⁹	to the body’s blood.

(Whaley 2002: 30)

Also the relationship between the rhythmic pounding of the sea and that of the heart is given:

God of the clash of Odin’s griddle,	Warrior of battle,
I thought I was thrusting my sword,	I thought I was thrusting my sword,
with its greed for blood, even nearer	with its greed for blood, even nearer
to where the blood-tracks meet;	to the heart
but the launcher of the sea’s horse	but the man
could not bite with murderous mouth	could not bite with blade
the mate of the pounding sea;	the pounding heart;

⁷ The name Lodur is related to Luhdurar (fire-bringer) (McCulloch 1964: 147).

⁸ Haenir’s epithets might relate to water: ‘silent one’ might refer to still water and ‘long-legged’ means swift and could apply to running water. Haenir is like the Indian Soma, who is said to be ‘swift as steeds’ and ‘king of rivers’, but unlike him is said to have a sound like thunder (Keith 1964: 46-47).

⁹ Along with Ati, Snorri includes the name Haemir in his list of sea-kings (Sturluson 1987: 155).

my mind is set on her

my mind is set on her

(Whaley 2002: 31)

This also answers Grimm's quandary as to why Odin gives *önd* and it is Haenir who gives *ôd*. It arises because Odin as a god of wind is associated with the breath, and not with the heart that was held the power to drive a person into passion, since the heart was more closely equated with the sea.

The fire god Lodur, who gave man heat and hue, is equivalent to Loki, and Snorri substitutes Loki for Lodur when referring to the three gods.¹⁰ Loki's name is also similar to the word for fire 'logi' and the German word for fire 'lohi'. Loki is the son of Farbauti (dangerous striker) just as Logi/Eldr (fire) is the son of Forniot, along with Aegir/Hler (sea) and Kari/Vindr (wind), who are considered giants rather than Aesir. His mother is Laufey (leaf-full) or Nal (needle), while his brothers are Byleist (lightning storm) and Helblindi (blind one from Hel). Loki's other name is Lopt (airy one). (Sturluson 1987: 26)

The Icelandic word for a sulfur fire is 'Loka daun' (Loki's vapor) (Grimm 2004: 916) and old firing chips were called 'Loki's chips' (Grimm 2004: 149). In Sweden, when a child's tooth was thrown into the fire, they would say "Lokke, Lokke, here is a [bone] tooth, give me a [gold] tooth" (Grimm 2004: 149), in Norway leftovers were thrown in to feed him, and according to a Norwegian saying the snapping of logs in a stove was Loki beating his children (Simek 1993: 196-197).¹¹ Loki's parentage too implies he was the son of lightning and plentiful leaves (spark

¹⁰ It is interesting that Lodur is the one god mentioned in the *Poetic Edda* that is not mentioned anywhere in Snorri's work, although he appears in Saxo as Loder. Lodur is also the god of fire mentioned by Caesar.

¹¹ As god of the hearth-fire he was a useful helper, but when his flames grew he could cause the destruction of an entire homestead. The more wild and violent spirit of Loki might have also been associated with a volcanic eruption or lightning. The Indian fire god Agni was known as "lord of the house" and had the beneficial aspect of driving away evil spirits.

and tinder).¹² Loki was also attributed the role of creating earthquakes, thus he was also a god of the underworld.

She saw a captive lying under the grove of hot springs,
That evil-loving form, Loki she recognized;
There sits Sign, not at all happy
about her husband—
do you understand yet, or what more?
(Larrington 1999: 8)

These three Norse gods are equivalent to the gods of sky (air), underworld (fire), and sea (water) that appear in Greek myth as Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon. They are also similar to the three gods in Indian myth Indra, Agni, and Soma; and in Syrian myth as Anu, Eilli, and Ea. Eilli and Ea are the same as Vili and Ve, with Odin merely substituted for Anu. Like Odin, Anu is known as the father of mankind. Even the order of the gods is preserved throughout: Odin, Vili and Ve compared to Anu, Eilli and Ea.

Anu went up to the sky,
And Ellil took the earth for his people.
The bolt which bars the sea
Was assigned to far-sighted Enki [Ea].
(Dalley 1991: 9)

There are three figures that appear in the Indian *Rig Veda* who might represent these gods:

¹² The other name for his mother, Nal (needle), in relation to fire may refer to the fire stick used to ignite tinder or perhaps the pine needles used as the tinder itself. The Indian god of fire Agni had parents who were the fire sticks: father the upper stick, mother the lower (O'Flaherty 1981: 113).

This beloved gray priest has a middle brother who is hungry and a third brother with butter on his back. In him I saw the Lord of All Tribes with his seven sons. (O'Flaherty 1981: 76)

The three long-haired ones reveal themselves at the right moment. During the year, one of them shaves, one looks upon everything with his powers; of one the onrush is visible, but the form is not. (O'Flaherty 1981: 80)

In the first passage the one who is hungry would be fire, the other two are unclear.¹³ In the second passage the one who shaves is fire (Agni), the one who looks upon everything is the Sun (Surya), and the onrush is the wind (Vayu or Indra).

There is also a similarity between Indra and Vindr, as well as Agni and Logi.¹⁴ Indra is god of the sky and thunder and Agni is god of domestic fire, lightning and the hearth. Both are at times equated with the Sun. Agni is the child of sky and earth or the two fire-sticks and is said to have two mothers (O'Flaherty 1981: 103).¹⁵ As fire, Agni is said to have golden teeth and like Loki is able to change gender (O'Flaherty 1981: 102, 118).

Odin and Indra

Indian myths dealing with the theft of the Soma parallel the story of the theft of the Mead in the Eddas. The Soma, however, is a drink of immortality, brought to humanity by Indra from his father Tvastr with the help of an eagle.

¹³ These could be Indra, Agni, and Soma.

¹⁴ Like Loki, Agni was pursued by the gods and hid in a lake where they eventually found him (Ananikian, p. 44).

¹⁵ Elsewhere it is said Indra created fire with two stones (O'Flaherty 1981: 161).

Stretching out in flight, holding the stem, the eagle brought the exhilarating and intoxicating drink from the distance. Accompanied by the gods, the bird clutched the Soma tightly after he took it from that highest heaven. (O'Flaherty 1981: 128)

After his birth, Indra went to his father Tvastr's house and there drank the *soma* that was an intoxicating drink pressed in twin bowls, then he killed his father (O'Flaherty 1981: 142-143). Given that the story of Kvasir having arisen from a peace treaty is a later invention, it does not refute the identification of him and Tvastr as deriving from the same character.

Indra then has a primeval contest with the dragon Vrtra, whom he killed and by piercing its trunk he caused the seven rivers to spring forth, that flowed down into the sea.

"I killed Vrtra, O Maruts, by my Indra-power, having grown strong through my own glorious rage. With the thunderbolt on my arm I made these all-luminous waters move well for man." (O'Flaherty 1981: 169)

The body of Vrtra must then be considered to be the land, thus is a creation of the world similar to that of the slaying of Ymir. However, Ymir appears more similar to Yama, the first man and king of the underworld. He is also like Purusa the cosmic giant, sacrificed to create the things of the world and heaven. The birth out of Ymir's legs and from under his arm parallels the generation of the four classes of mankind from Purusa:

When they divided the Man,
Into how many parts did they apportion him?
What do they call his mouth,

His two arms and thighs and feet?
His mouth became Brahmin;
His arms were made into the Warrior,
His thighs the People,
And from his feet the Servants were born?
The moon was born from his mind;
From his eye the sun was born.
Indra and Agni came from his mouth,
And from his vital breath the Wind was born.
From his navel the middle realm of space arose;
From his head the sky evolved.
From his two feet came the earth,
And the quarters of the sky from his ear.
Thus they set the worlds in order.
(O'Flaherty 1981: 31)

Yama's father was the Sun and the first mortal man who was also thus the first one to make the journey into the otherworld, where he became king. His wife was Yami and his brother was Manu, the father of mankind, whom Indra led to safety on the flood waters (O'Flaherty 1981: 169-170). This seems to set up an alternative to Purusa as the progenitor. In the Eddas everything is created from Ymir. Certainly the roles of the different players were confounded, but clearly Ymir and Yama must have once been the same.

The Iranian Yima, like Yama, was the first mortal, who built the *vara* (enclosure) that would protect those who would repopulate the earth after the great winter came (McCulloch 1964: 346). This resembles both Fimbulwinter and the hiding of Lif and Lifthrasir in Hoddmimir's holt.

Manu is said to be the son of the Self-born One, and himself seems identical to the German Mannus, son of Tuisto the son of Earth as mentioned by Tacitus, from whom the three Germanic tribes are descended. It could be too that Dis Pater, the primal ancestor of the Gauls mentioned by Caesar, could have been Yama, as he and Dis are both gods of the underworld.

Indra was also said to be the lord of bay horses, two of them were thought to carry to him the Soma sacrifice. A certain horse called Swift-Runner, who was to represent the Sun, is similar to Odin's horse Sleipnir (Swift One).

When you whinnied for the first time, as you were born coming forth from the ocean or from the celestial source, with the wings of an eagle and the forelegs of an antelope—that, Swift Runner, was your great and awesome birth. Yama gave him and Trita harnessed him; Indra was the first to mount him, and the Gandharva grasped his reins. You gods fashioned the horse out of the sun. (O'Flaherty 1981: 80)

This by no means exhausts the associations. The sky god Dyaus is a direct representative of the Norse Tyr and the Greek Zeus. Dyaus (father sky) was associated with the goddess Prthivi (mother earth), who were together known as Dyavaparthivi (Keith 1964: 16). Prthivi herself might have a direct connection to Freyia and Frigg (Grimm 2004: 303).

Conclusion

The three gods Odin, Lodur and Haenir serve the important role of the creation of mankind in Nordic mythology. By each bestowing their powers of wind, fire and water, the human is born out of inanimate drift wood. Odin can be seen in an early form as a god of the sky and Lodur as

a god of fire, akin to Loki. Haenir's identification is not as well supported by direct references, as they are few, but it can be presumed that once there is evidenced a wind and a fire god that descriptions only need not contradict specifically that he is the missing god of water. His epithets here even offer support.

The presence of two traditions that name Odin's brothers appear to relate to Syrian myth in the case of Vili and Ve (Eilli and Ea) and to Indian myth in the case of Lodur and Haenir (Agni and Soma). There is less of a clear identification with specific gods in the Indian but there exist obvious mythic parallels. These are not lacking in the Syrian either, in the case of the Baldr tradition. In both cases, there is some potential to establish a latest possible date for the origin of the myth, which would be the breaking off point between the two alternate traditions. Comparisons might also reveal something of the original form of the myth, when common details can be identified.

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