

# Utgard

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Anyone who has ever picked up a book on Norse mythology knows about the conflict between the gods and the giants. It is pictured as an endless dualistic struggle between the forces of order and chaos, or good and evil, which will culminate in the epic struggle of Ragnarok. And yet, despite the gusto with which Thor bashes etins, the old literature leaves one with a curiously ambiguous picture. Ancient and terrible the Jotnar may be, but are they simply destructive, or does the conflict between them and the lords of Asgard have a deeper significance?

As I explore the spiritual ecology of the North I have come to believe that far from being the eternal enemy, the Jotnar may have a crucial role to play in the survival of the world and its inhabitants, including human beings. An analysis of their origins and functions not only illuminates their relationship to the gods (and therefore the meaning of the Aesir as well), but suggests a new way to interpret some of the ambiguities encountered in Norse attitudes towards the feminine and the natural world.

The mythologies of other early cultures reveal a pattern which may be paralleled in that of the North. Bearing in mind that traditional cultures do not have a single, canonical, "creation myth," still, almost everywhere we find a first generation of deities who are responsible for the creation of the world, and who are later supplanted by their children, the pantheon whose worship becomes the religion of the land.

The Graeco-Roman creation myth tells how *Gaia*, Mother Earth, arose from the empty "yawning" of Chaos and conceived the Titanic powers by Ouranos, who suppressed them before they could be born into the world. The last of them, Kronos, attacked and emasculated his father, separating him from the earth. The Titans who were then released were powers of the sun and moon, darkness and the dawn. Monsters of various kinds were also created. Kronos (Time) married his sister Rhea (Space) and they became the parents of the Olympian gods. Eventually the gods, aided by monstrous allies and the counsel of Mother Earth, defeated and imprisoned the Titans in Tartaros. Nonetheless, the time when Kronos and the Titans led was considered by the Greeks to have been a golden age.

Despite the theological sophistication of Hinduism, traces remain of a pre-Vedic system in which "The gods and the anti-gods are the twofold offspring of the lord-of-progeny (*Prajapati*). Of these the gods are the younger, the antigods, the older. They have been struggling with each other for the dominion of the worlds." (*Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.1. [205]). These antigods are sometimes called *asuras* (later construed as a-suras, or "not-gods") although this term, derived from the root as "to be" or *Asu*, "breath," was

originally used to identify the most important gods. Although the asuras are seen as opponents, many among them are described as wise and beneficent and aid the gods. Among the asuras the *Mahabharata* includes *daityas* (genii), *darnavas* (giants), *kalakanjas* (stellar spirits), *kalejas* (demons of time), *nagas* (serpents), and *raksasas* (night wanderers, or demons). They live in palaces in mountain caves, the bowels of the earth, the sea, and the sky. They are said to be powerful in battle and magic.

In Egyptian religion, the oldest company of gods seems to have represented properties of primeval matter. According to F. A. Wallace Budge, "... in primeval times at least the Egyptians believed in the existence of a deep and boundless watery mass out of which had come into being the heavens, and the earth, and everything that is in them." (*The Gods of the Egyptians*, I:283). These powers were represented by four pairs of gods and goddesses. The world as we know it was created by the action of the Khepera aspect of the sun-god, who says in the Book of the Overthrowing of Apepi,

"Heaven did not exist, and earth had not come into being, and the things of the earth and creeping things had not come into existence in that place, and I raised them from out of Nu from a state of inactivity." (295)

This bears a remarkable resemblance to the opening of *Voluspa*:

"In earliest times did Ymir live,  
was nor sea nor land nor salty waves,  
neither earth was there, nor upper heaven,  
but a gaping nothing, and green things nowhere ...  
Was the land then lifted by the sons of Bor,  
who made Midgard, the matchless earth ..."  
(verses 3, 4 - Hollander's translation)

Unless one is prepared to believe that the author of the Edda read hieroglyphics, one must accept this idea as a way of conceptualizing creation common to many early peoples. The "inactivity" of Nu is a reasonable southern parallel to the eternal ice that encased Ymir. In both cases, the earth we know is "lifted" into a state of manifestation by the action of a more clearly personified power. In the Younger Edda, we learn that the world was fashioned from Ymir's skull and bones, freed from the ice by the tongue of Audhumla, the primal female principle in the form of a cow.

In all of these mythologies, the elder gods are the world creators and elemental powers. Myths about them have to do with their origins and their battles against the race of gods who supplanted them. They may be portrayed as monstrous or fair, but always they dwell in wild places - Utgard - or in the element to which they belong. Although they are the opponents of the gods, they do not appear to be hostile to men. In fact, they have very little to do with human concerns.

A number of theories have been offered to account for this cosmic struggle. A hypothesis adopted by many scholars has been that the elder deities, such as the asuras, were the

gods of races conquered by the people who worship the gods. The asuras were the gods of pre-Vedic India, and presumably the Jotnar and Titans would be the deities of the pre-Indo-European peoples of their lands. However this theory does not explain why gods and giants should differ in function.

Although some of the Jotnar are allies of the Aesir - Aegir, for instance, who brews ale in his cauldrons so that the gods can feast in his undersea hall, or Vafthruthnir, who teaches Odhin wisdom - their functions clearly have to do with natural forces. Aegir is a god of the ocean; his wife Ran rules the depths beneath the waves who are their daughters. However it is the Van, Njordh, who watches over ships and those who make their living on sea. Fjorgyn is Earth, but Freyr and Freyja, the alfar and armadhr, "harvest man," are invoked to aid in farming. It is not the gods who are the personified natural forces beloved of 19th century folklorists, but the Jotnar.

The gods, be they Aesir or Olympians, can be seen as the product of evolving human consciousness. Odhin, first of the Aesir to arise, gives us the runes, the symbols and words of power by which the human intellect is enabled to comprehend the world. The Jotun expresses the natural power, while the god embodies the qualities needed for humans to deal with it. In the myths, the Aesir are able to interbreed with Jotnar or humankind. The stories of interaction between the gods and the giants can almost serve as a chronicle of the changing relationship between evolving human consciousness the natural world.

Of all the Aesir, Thor, the thunderer and great slayer of giants, is the most elemental. He is the Son of Earth, and his rune is that of the thurs. He joys in the chaos of the storm, but he can use its energy to protect humankind. But his is not a war of extermination. In *The Lay of Harbarth*, Thor tells us, "much might had the etins if all did live; little might had men then in Midgard's rounds." (23). As Gro Steinsland points out (1986), this is not a war of extermination, but of balance.

For a long time it was assumed that one distinction between Jotnar and Aesir was that the giants were never worshipped. However, Steinsland has demonstrated that the giants, or more particularly the giantesses, did indeed receive cult worship in the Viking Age. She proposes that Snorri's account of how the gods gave part of the roasting ox to Thiazi while traveling to visit Utgard-Loki reflects an ancient ritual in which offerings were made to the wilderness powers. Skadi's reply to Loki's taunts in Lokasenna refers to her holy groves and hallowed shrines, a boast supported by many place names. She is not only the daughter of a giant, but the home she inherited from him is located in Asgard. However for the most part, the hallows of the Jotnar are to be found in Utgard - "outside the garth" - in the wilderness beyond the fields we know.

The Jotnar are elemental in character and force, associated with the regions or environments in which they live (cliff-thurses, berg risi, or mountain giants or trolls, rime-thurses, sons of Surtr, Aegir, Ran and the waves, etc. ) They rule the realm of Nature, and can thus be viewed as chieftains of the orders of nature spirits appropriate to various environments; the *skogsran* or "wood-roes," of the forest, who can bestow

blessings in exchange for offerings; the *nackar* or "nixies," sjoera, lake spirits, and *forskarlar*, the falls-men, in the water; the *duergar* (dwarves) who live under the earth, and the *landvaettir*, or land-wights, for a region in general. These are what the people at Findhorn in Scotland call the *devas*, the spirits which inhabit and give health to the environment, ranging from entities that express the spirit of a place or a group or species of living things (such as a forest), to the spirits of individual flowers and trees. Even during the Christian period they survived in Faerie, in which noble races of elves are accompanied by all kinds of sprites and goblins. In medieval folklore, the Jotnar devolved into hags, giants and trolls, and their attendant nature spirits into dwarves, dryads and the like, but they continue to dwell outside the boundaries of the human world.

But not all of the Jotnar live in the wilderness. Giantesses are co-opted into the world of the gods as mothers and mates. In fact, a majority of the Aesir are the children of Jotnar on one or both sides. Indeed, when an As or Van seeks a bride outside Asgard, his only source of mates is in Jotunheim. Scratch a goddess, and you are likely to uncover an etin-bride. The courtships of Skadi and Gerd are particularly noteworthy, and it is significant that they are married to Vanir, the gods most closely connected with the natural world. Odhin himself sires children by a number of giantesses, most notable Jordh, or earth, the mother of Thor, and Rind, who bears him Vali. On the other hand, those female Jotun who are not co-opted by marriage appear to be more feared by the Aesir than are the males.

The male Jotnar slain by Thor are viewed as worthy antagonists who can sometimes be tricked into sharing their wisdom or powers. But the females, even Hyrokkin, whose strength is required to push Baldr's funeral ship out to sea, evoke a primal terror. They are not only wild, but female, with all of the suppressed power of both the feminine and the wilderness. In his analysis of prayers to Thor, John Lindow identifies eight killings of female Jotnar and four of male.

"Thor was the defender of Asgard, as Thorbjorn himself put it, against the forces of evil and chaos. These forces seem, in the reality of peoples' lives, ... to have had a very strong female component.... If those who fight for order are male, then it is appropriate that those who fight for disorder should be female."  
 (Lindow, 1988, p. 127)

At this point a good feminist should say, "how like a man," but I think that the causes of this hostility lie deeper than simple misogyny. Norse culture in general approaches the feminine with a mixture of emotions, seeing it as irrational and equating loss of status with loss of control, while at the same time retaining the memory of a long tradition of reverence for women and belief in their superior spiritual powers. This attitude is paralleled by equally ambivalent feeling about the world of nature. Is it therefore surprising that the Jotnar - the primal powers of nature - who are most feared should be personified as female?

Female biology makes it harder for women to suppress awareness of their physical nature in the way that men often do, and though women are less likely to seek battle, once enraged may fight with a fury that ignores the rules by which men like to conduct their wars (certainly some of the women in the sagas are first class bitches, and the men might have been better off if their wives had been allowed to fight the bloodfeuds). These generalizations reflect the social stereotypes of our culture; in reality there is a considerable overlap between the genders in this regard, and intellect, intuition, and the like are uniquely mixed in each individual. Given this caveat, such social and biological factors may explain why men have tended to link the feminine with Nature, which can be both terrible and nurturing, as well as with the irrational, the unconscious, and spiritual power.

Steinsland makes a good case for the survival of rituals addressed to the Jotnar into the Viking Age. Rather than identifying this as a lingering superstition, let us consider what function retaining a reverence for powers first conceptualized at the birth of human culture might serve in a supposedly more "civilized" age. The scholars who look upon myths of the passage of power from Jotnar or Titans to the shining gods as a reflection of a historical process may be seeing only part of the picture. A more accurate way to describe the change might be as evolutionary. Evolution does imply change over time, but this change can consist of alteration within a continuing group as well as the replacement of one culture or species by another.

The human brain is an example of an organism which has developed by adding new structures and functions to older ones. Most people today have access only to the newer levels of consciousness, and are disturbed by the "irrational" emotions that shake them when the older parts of the brain are aroused. In the same way, our civilization thinks of itself as "modern," and has trouble understanding the social movements that arise when deeper needs revive older ways.

A major paradigm shift in our relationship to Nature is taking place in this century - a change that must occur if humanity is to survive. Ours is the first generation to be aware of the fragility of the environment. "Primitive" people retain an instinctive awareness that the only way to survive in an environment that is more powerful than they are is by learning to live in harmony with its forces. But as civilization and the development of technology have given humans more control over their surroundings, Nature has become an adversary. In the natural world, birth and death, creation and destruction, are parts of a continuing cycle in which both are equally crucial to long-term survival. Modern man can accept this in theory so long as he remains insulated from its realities by his technology. But, especially in the ancient North, where the climate is unforgiving, it is understandable that in the Viking Age the world outside the walls of the garth should have often been seen as something to fear.

And yet, as Kirsten Hastrup shows in *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, access to the actual or psychic wilderness was necessary for magic. The outlaw, or "out-lier" is banished outside the boundaries of the community, and yet that position may enable him to serve it in ways impossible for those who stay safe within walls.

"In the cases of both hamrammr and berserkr there is a movement, in body on the one hand, in personality on the other. Such movement seems to have been easily imagined, in a world where every man had his fylgja, his double in wild space."  
(Hastrup, 1985, 153)

The tension is not only between order and chaos, but between control and power. This is why Thor never kills all of the giants, why the Aesir seek Jotun-brides, why Odhin goes to Vafthruthnir to seek wisdom - and why worship at the shrines of Skadi and other Jotun continued into the Viking Age. From wilderness comes the energy that humans, like other species, need to survive.

What will happen if humans forget how to balance this energy? Ragnarok acquires a different meaning in each age. The Voluspa foretells a simultaneous breakdown in the natural balance and the social order. Odhin marshals the Einherjar and the gods march out for the last time to meet their foes. When all is destroyed,

"Neath sea the land sinketh, the sun dimmeth,  
from the heavens fall the fair bright stars;  
gusheth forth steam and gutting fire,  
to very heaven soar the hurtling flames." (56)

The order of creation described in the early myths is being reversed. The world will return to its primal elements once more.

For the ancient Norse, the fear was that natural forces would grow too powerful. But science shows us that it is equally dangerous to suppress powerful force too far or too long. The film *Koyaanisqatsi* presented a frightening picture of a world out of balance. Whether the Jotnar are allowed to rage unchecked or suppressed too completely, disaster will follow. Today's vision of Ragnarok is of an age when natural cycles have been pushed so far out of balance that only the most chaotic and destructive of the powers of nature will remain.

Can this disaster be avoided? Early cultures, living in a world in which the seasonal alternation of birth and death was more accepted than it is today, tend to think in terms of cycles rather than of linear progression. But though the Volva foresees destruction for the gods, the victory of chaos is not final -

"I see green again - with growing things,  
the earth arise from out of the sea ...  
again the Aesir on Itha Plain meet ...  
again go over the great world-doom,  
and Fimbultyr's unfathomed runes." (59)

The process of creation is repeated, and once more Odhin's runes give meaning to the world.

In a world of vanishing rainforests and global warming, it may seem that the Time of Earth Changes foretold by more recent prophets such as Sun Bear is unavoidable. In the long run this is probably true, for why should either a physical body or the world be expected to last forever? For the world, as for us, death should be viewed not as an extinction but as a transformation so that the cycle can begin anew. Still, just as abuse of one's body can shorten, or healthy living extend, a human lifespan, humans have the power to hasten Ragnarok or to lengthen this age of the world. With that power comes responsibility.

Environmentalists have provided us with more than enough information to start work on the physical plane, and there should be no need to repeat their instructions here. But those of us who follow the Way of the North have an additional opportunity. We are already vowed to stand with the gods - what we must do now is to understand their relationship to the Jotnar so that we do not end up sabotaging our own side.

We need the giants as we need the wilderness, as a source of the nourishment required for our physical and spiritual survival. They provide psychological stability by aligning the powers of nature and protection at the species level, for they are the spiritual ancestors of all living things. Even abandoning intellect and technology and returning to the primitive wouldn't help, but as we use the gifts of the gods, we should remember that even Thor does not attempt to completely exterminate his enemies. These days perhaps we ought to be supporting the Jotnar rather than fighting them.

Jotun myths have to do with creation and cosmic patterning. In recreating the myths we recreate the world. Along with the land-spirits, they should therefore receive offerings and honor. When we seek to work in trance, to draw on the deepest powers that lie hidden in our own Utgards, the Jotnar may even be invoked first in the ritual.

Like other forms of paganism, the Northern branch of the Old Religion is an Earth-religion. As Steinsland put it, "After all, it would be more remarkable if Norse tradition should miss any ritual dealing with powers on whom the whole of existence finally depended. The giants are as necessary to the world as the gods are." (ibid, p. 221). In recreating the practice of Norse religion, we must not forget to honor those powers.

## References

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