

ODIN - *Father of the Gods*



Odin, Wotan, or Woden is the highest and holiest God of the Northern races. Ruler of the Æsir, God of the runes, inspiration, shamanism, magic and war. Odin is also known as God of the hanged and the Wild Hunt and the God of storm, rain and harvest. He is the all-pervading spirit of the universe, the personification of the air, the God of universal wisdom and victory, and the leader and protector of princes and heroes. As all the Gods are descended from him, he is surnamed Allfather, and as eldest and chief among them he occupies Asgard, the highest seat. Known by the name of Hlidskialf, this chair is not only an exalted throne, but also a mighty watch tower, from whence he could overlook the whole world and see at a glance all that is happening among Gods, giants, elves, dwarfs, and men.

*"From the hall of Heaven he rode away
To Hlidskialf, and sate upon his throne,
The mount, from whence his eye surveys the world. And far from
Heaven he turn'd his shining orbs
To look on Midgard, and the earth and men."*

-BALDER DEAD (Matthew Arnold)

None but Odin and his wife and queen Frigga have the privilege of using this seat, and when they occupy it they generally gaze towards the south and west, the goal of all the hopes and excursions of the Northern nations. Odin is generally represented as a tall, vigorous man, about fifty years of age, either with dark curling hair or with a long gray beard and bald head. He is sometimes clad in a suit of gray, with a blue hood, and his muscular body is enveloped in a wide blue mantle all flecked with gray - an emblem of the sky with its fleecy clouds. In his hand Odin generally carries the infallible spear Gungnir, which is so sacred that an oath sworn upon its point can never be broken, and on his finger or arm he wears the marvelous ring Draupnir, the emblem of fruitfulness, precious beyond compare. When seated upon his throne or armed for the fray, in which he often takes an active part, Odin wears his eagle helmet; but when he wanders about the earth in human guise, to see what men are doing, he generally dons a broad-brimmed hat, drawn down low over his forehead to conceal the fact of his having but one eye.

*"Then into the Volsungs' dwelling a mighty man there strode, One-eyed and seeming ancient, yet bright
his visage glowed; Cloud-blue was the hood upon him, and his kirtle gleaming-gray
As the latter morning sun dog when the storm is on the way*

*A bill he bore on his shoulder, whose mighty ashen beam Burnt bright with the flame of the sea and the
blended silver's*

gleam."

-SIGURD THE VOLSUNG (William Morris)



Two ravens, Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory), are perched upon his shoulders as he sits upon his throne, and these he sends out into the wide world every morning, anxiously watching for their return

at nightfall, when they whisper into his ears news of all they had seen and heard, keeping him well informed about everything that is happening on earth.

*"Hugin and Munin
Fly each day
Over the spacious earth.
I fear for Hugin
That he come not back,
Yet more anxious am I for Munin."*

-NORSE MYTHOLOGY (R. B. Anderson)

At his feet crouch two wolves or hunting hounds, Geri and Freki, which animals are therefore considered sacred to him, and of good omen if met by the way. Odin always feeds these wolves with his own hands from the meat set before him, for he requires no food at all, and seldom tastes anything except the sacred mead.

*"Geri and Freki
The war-wont sates,
The triumphant sire of hosts; But on wine only
The famed in arms
Odin, ever lives."*

-LAY OF GRIMNIR (Thorpe's tr.)

When seated in state upon his throne, Odin rests his feet upon a footstool of gold, the work of the Gods, whose furniture and utensils are all fashioned either of that precious metal or of silver.

Besides the magnificent hall Glads-heim, where stands the twelve seats occupied by the Gods when they meet in council, and Valaskialf, where his throne, Hlidskialf, is placed, Odin has a third palace in Asgard, situated in the midst of the marvelous grove Glasir, whose leaves were all of shimmering red gold.

Valhalla

This palace, called Valhalla (the hall of the chosen slain), has five hundred and forty doors, wide enough to allow the passage of eight hundred warriors abreast, and above the principal gate is a boar's head and an eagle whose piercing glance look all over the world. The walls of this marvelous building are fashioned of glittering spears, so highly polished that they illuminate all the hall. The roof is made of golden shields, and the benches are decorated with fine armor, the God's gifts to his guests. Here long tables afford ample accommodations for the warriors fallen in battle, who are called Einheriar, and are considered Odin's favorite guests.

*"Easily to be known is,
By those who to Odin come,
The mansion by its aspect.
Its roof with spears is laid,
Its hall with shields is decked,
With corselets are its benches strewed."*

-LAY OF GRIMNIR (Thorpe's tr.)

The ancient Northern nations, who deemed warfare the most honorable of occupations, and considered courage the greatest virtue, worshiped Odin principally as God of battle and victory, and believed that whenever a fight was about to occur he sent out his special attendants, the shield, battle, or wish maidens, called Valkyries (choosers of the slain). They select one half the dead warriors, and bore them on their fleet steeds over the quivering rainbow bridge Bifröst, into his hall, where many honors await them. Welcomed by Odin's sons, Hermod and Bragi, the heroes are then conducted to the foot of Odin's throne, where they receive the praises due their valor. When some special favorite of the God is thus brought into Asgard, Valfather (father of the slain), as Odin is called when he presides over the warriors, sometimes rises from his throne to meet him at the door and himself bid him welcome.

The Feast of the Heroes

Besides the hope of the glory of such a distinction, and the promise of dwelling in Odin's beloved presence day after day, other more material pleasures await the warriors in Valhalla. They are seated around the board, where the beautiful white-armed virgins, the Valkyries, having laid aside their armor and clad themselves in pure white robes, constantly wait upon them. These maidens bring the heroes great horns full of delicious mead, and set before them huge portions of boars' flesh, upon which they feast most heartily. The usual Northern drink was beer or ale, but our ancestors fancied this beverage too coarse for the heavenly sphere. They therefore imagined that Valfather kept his table liberally supplied with mead or hydromel, which was daily furnished in great abundance by his she-goat Heidrun, continually browsing on the tender leaves and twigs on Yggdrasil's topmost branch, Lerad.

"Rash war and perilous battle, their delight; And immature, and red with glorious wounds, Unpeaceful death their choice: deriving thence

A right to feast and drain immortal bowls, In Odin's hall; whose blazing roof resounds The genial uproar of those shades who fall In desperate fight, or by some brave attempt."

-LIBERTY (James Thomson)

The meat upon which the Einherjar feast is the flesh of the divine boar Sæhrimnir, a marvelous beast, daily slain by the cook Andhrimnir, and boiled in the great caldron Eldhrimnir; but although Odin's guests have true Northern appetites and fairly gorge themselves, there is always plenty of meat for all.

*"Andhrimnir cooks
In Eldhrimnir Sæhrimnir;
'Tis the best of flesh; But few know*

*What the einherjes eat."
(Anderson's version)*

Moreover the supply is exhaustless, for the boar always comes to life again before the time for the next meal, when he is again slain and devoured. This miraculous renewal of supplies in the larder is not the only wonderful occurrence in Valhalla, for it is also related that the warriors, after having eaten and drunk to satiety, always call for their weapons, arm themselves, and ride out into the great courtyard, where they fight against one another, repeating the feats of arms achieved while on earth, and

-LAY OF GRIMNIR

recklessly dealing terrible wounds, which are miraculously and completely healed as soon as the dinner horn is sounded.

*"All the chosen guests of Odin Daily ply the trade of war;
From the fields of festal fight Swift they ride in gleaming arms, And gaily, at the board of gods, Quaff
the cup of sparkling ale
And eat Sæhrimni's vaunted flesh."*

-V AFTHRUDNI'S-MAL (W. Taylor's tr.)

Whole and happy once more, - for they bore one another no grudge for the cruel thrusts given and received, and live in perfect amity together, - the Einheriar then ride gaily back to Valhalla to renew their feasts in Odin's beloved presence, while the white-armed Valkyries, with flying hair, glide gracefully about, constantly filling their horns or their favorite drinking vessels while the scalds sing of war and stirring Viking expeditions.

*"And all day long they there are hack'd and hewn
Mid dust, and groans, and limbs lopp'd off, and blood; But all at night return to Odin's hall
Woundless and fresh; such lot is theirs in Heaven."*

-BALDER DEAD (Matthew Arnold)

Thus fighting and feasting, the heroes are said to spend day after day in perfect bliss, while Odin delights in their strength and number, which, however, he foresees will not long avail to ward off his downfall when the day of the last battle dawns.

As such pleasures were the highest a Northern warrior's fancy could paint, it was very natural that all fighting men should love Odin, and early in life should dedicate themselves to his service. They vowed to die arms in hand, if possible, and even wounded themselves with their own spears when death drew near, if they had been unfortunate enough to escape death on the battlefield and were threatened with "straw death," as they called decease from old age or sickness.

*"To Odin then true-fast
Carves he fair runics, -
Death-runes cut deep on his arm and his breast."*

-VIKING TALES OF THE NORTH (R. B. Anderson)

In reward for this devotion Odin watches with special care over his favorites, giving them a magic sword, spear, or horse, and making them invincible until their last hour has come, when he himself appears to claim or destroy the gift he has bestowed, and the Valkyries carries them off to Valhalla.

*"He gave to Hermod
A helm and corselet, And from him Sigmund A sword received."*

-LAY OF HYNDLA (Thorpe's tr.)

Sleipnir

Whenever Odin took an active part in war, he generally rode his eight-footed gray steed, Sleipnir, brandished his white shield, and flung his glittering spear over the heads of the combatants, who only awaited this signal to fall upon one another, while the God dashed into their midst shouting his warcry: "Odin has you all!"

*"And Odin donn'd
His dazzling corslet and his helm of gold, And led the way on Sleipnir."*

-BALDER DEAD (Matthew Arnold)

At times he also used his magic bow, from which he shot ten arrows at once, everyone invariably bringing down a foe. Odin is also supposed to inspire his favorite warriors with the renowned "Berserker rage" (bare sark or shirt), which enables them to perform unheard-of feats of valor and strength.

As Odin's characteristics, like the all-pervading elements, are multitudinous, so also are his names, of which he has no less than two hundred, almost all of which are descriptive of some phase of his being. He is also considered the ancient God of seamen and of the wind:

*"Mighty Odin,
Norsemen hearts we bend to thee! Steer our barks, all-potent Woden, O'er the surging Baltic Sea."*

-VAIL

The Wild Hunt

Odin, as wind God, generally rode about on his eight-footed steed Sleipnir, a habit which gave rise to the oldest Northern riddle, which runs as follows: "Who are the two who ride to the Thing? Three eyes have they together, ten feet, and one tail; and thus they travel through the lands." And as the souls of the dead were supposed to be wafted away on the wings of the storm, Odin was worshiped as the leader of all disembodied spirits. In this character he was most generally known as the Wild Hunts man, and when people heard the rush and roar of the wind they cried aloud in superstitious fear, fancying they heard and saw him ride past with his train, all mounted on snorting steeds, and accompanied by baying hounds. And the passing of the Wild Hunt, known as Woden's Hunt, the Raging Host, Gabriel's Hounds, or Asgardreia, was also considered a presage of misfortune of some kind, such as pestilence or war.

"The Rhine flows bright; but its waves ere long Must hear a voice of war,

And a clash of spears our hills among, And a trumpet from afar;

And the brave on a bloody turf must lie, For the Huntsman bath gone by!"

Mimir's Well

-THE WILD HUNTSMAN (Mrs. Hemans)

To obtain the great wisdom for which he is so famous, Odin, in the morn of time, wandered off to Mimir's (Memor, memory) spring, "the fountain of all wit and wisdom," in whose liquid depths even the future was clearly mirrored, and besought the old man who guarded it to let him have a draught. But Mimir, who well knew the value of such a favor (for his spring was considered the source or headwater of memory), refused to grant it unless Odin would consent to give one of his eyes in exchange.

The God did not hesitate, but immediately plucked out one of his eyes, which Mimir kept in pledge, sinking it deep down into his fountain, where it shone with mild luster, leaving Odin with but one eye, which is considered emblematic of the sun.

*"Through our whole lives we strive towards the sun; That burning forehead is the eye of Odin.
His second eye, the moon, shines not so bright;
It has he placed in pledge in Mimer's fountain,*

That he may fetch the healing waters thence, Each morning, for the strengthening of this eye."

-OEHLenschLÄGER (Howitt's tr.)

Drinking deeply of Mimir's fount, Odin gained the knowledge he coveted; and such was the benefit received that he never regretted the sacrifice he had made, but as further memorial of that day broke off a branch of the sacred tree Yggdrasil, which overshadowed the spring, and fashioned from it his beloved spear Gungnir.

*"A dauntless god
Drew for drink to its gleam,
Where he left in endless
Payment the light of an eye.
From the world-ash
Ere Wotan went he broke a bough;
For a spear the staff
He split with strength from the stem." -DUSK OF THE GODS, WAGNER (Forman's*

tr.)

But although Odin had won all knowledge, he was sad and oppressed, for he had also won an insight into futurity, and had become aware of the transitory nature of all things, and even of the fate of the Gods, who were doomed to pass away. This knowledge so affected his spirits that he ever after wore a melancholy and contemplative expression.

To test the value of the wisdom he had thus obtained, Odin soon went to visit the most learned of all the giants, Vafthrudnir, and entered with him into a contest of wit, in which the stake was nothing less than the loser's head.

*"Odin rose with speed, and went To contend in runic lore
With the wise and crafty jute. To Vafthrudni's royal hall*

*Came the mighty king of spells."
-V AFTHRUDNI'S-MAL*

Father of the Gods

(W. Taylor's tr.)

As personification of heaven, Odin, of course, was the lover and spouse of the earth, and as it appeared under a threefold aspect, the Northerners, although a chaste race, allotted to him several wives. The first among these was Jörd (Erda), the primitive earth, daughter of Night or of the giantess Fiorgyn. She bore him his famous son Thor, the God of thunder. The second and principal wife was Frigga, a personification of the civilized world. She gave him Balder, the gentle God of spring, Hermod, and, according to some authorities, Tyr. The third wife was Rinda, a personification of the hard and frozen earth, who reluctantly yields to his warm embrace, but finally gives birth to Vali, the emblem of vegetation. Odin is also said to have married Saga or Laga, the Goddess of history (hence our verb "to say"), and to have daily visited her in the crystal hall of Sokvabek, beneath a cool, ever-flowing river, to drink its waters and listen to her songs about olden times and vanished races.

*"Sokvabek hight the fourth dwelling; Over it flow the cool billows;
Glad drink there Odin and Saga Every day from golden cups."*

-NORSE MYTHOLOGY (R. E. Anderson)

His other wives were Grid, the mother of Vidar; Gunlod, the mother of Bragi; Skadi; and the nine giantesses who simultaneously bore Heimdall - all of whom play more or less important parts in the various myths of the North.

Historical Odin

Besides this ancient Odin, there was a more modern, semi-historical personage of the same name, to whom all the virtues, powers, and adventures of his predecessor have been attributed. He was the chief of the Æsir inhabitants of Asia Minor, who, sore pressed by the Romans, and threatened with destruction or slavery, left their native land about 70 B.C., and migrated into Europe. This Odin is said to have conquered Russia, Germany, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, leaving a son on the throne of each conquered country. He also built the town of Odenso. He was welcomed in Sweden by Gylfi, the king, who made him associate ruler, and allowed him to found the city of Sigtuna, where he built a temple and introduced a new system of worship. Tradition further relates that as his end drew near, this mythical Odin assembled his followers, publicly cut himself nine times in the breast with his spear, - a ceremony called "carving Geir odds," - and told them he was about to return to his native land Asgard, his old home, where lie would await their coming, to share with him a life of feasting, drinking, and fighting.

According to another account, Gylfi, having heard of the power of the Æsir, the inhabitants of Asgard, and wishing to ascertain whether these reports were true, journeyed off to the south. He soon came to Odin's palace, where he was expected, and where lie was deluded by the vision of three divinities, enthroned one above the other, and called Har, Iafn-har, and Thridi. The gatekeeper, Gangler, answered all his questions, gave him a long explanation of Northern mythology, which is recorded in the Younger Edda, and having finished his instructions, suddenly vanished with the palace amid a deafening noise.

According to other very ancient poems, Odin's sons, Weldegg, Beldegg, Sigi, Skiold, Sæming, and Yngvi, became kings of East Saxony, West Saxony, Franconia, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and from them are descended the Saxons, Hengist and Horsa, and the royal families of the Northern lands. Still another version relates that Odin and Frigga had seven sons, who founded the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. In the course of time this mysterious king was confounded with the Odin whose worship he introduced, and all his deeds were attributed to the God.

Odin was worshiped in numerous temples, but especially in the great fane at Upsala, where the most solemn festivals were held, and where sacrifices were offered. The victim was generally a horse, but in times of pressing need human offerings were made, even the king being once offered up to avert a famine.

*"Upsal's temple, where the North
Saw Valhal's halls fair imag'd here on earth."*

-VIKING TALES OF THE NORTH (R. B. Anderson)

The first toast at every festival here was drunk in his honor, and, besides the first of May, one day in every week was held sacred to him, and, from his Saxon name, Woden, was called Woden's day, whence the English word "Wednesday" has been derived. It was customary for the people to assemble at his shrine on festive occasions, to hear the songs of the scalds, who were rewarded for their

minstrelsy by the gift of golden bracelets or armlets, which curled up at the ends and were called "Odin's serpents."

There are but few remains of ancient Northern art now extant, and although rude statues of Odin were once quite common they have all disappeared, as they were made of wood - a perishable substance, which in the hands of the missionaries and especially of Olaf the Saint, the Northern iconoclast, was soon reduced to ashes.

"There in the Temple, carved in wood, The image of great Odin stood."

-SAGA OF KING OLAF (Longfellow)

Odin himself is supposed to have given his people a code of laws whereby to govern their conduct, in a poem called Hávamal, or the High Song, which forms part of the Edda. In this lay he taught the fallibility of man, the necessity for courage, temperance, independence, and truthfulness, respect for old age, hospitality, charity, and contentment, and gave instructions for the burial of the dead.

*"At home let a man be cheerful, And toward a guest liberal;
Of wise conduct he should be,
Of good memory and ready speech; If much knowledge he desires,*

He must often talk on what is good." -HÁVAMÁL (Thorpe's tr.)