

The Vafthrudnir Syndrome

by
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In the Sacred Myths of the Edda we can read of the contest of wisdom between Odin and the Giant Vafthrudnir. The Giants are sometimes portrayed as being dim-witted, but they do possess great knowledge, and this knowledge is usually of the past. From this description we can infer they are the guardians of the Lore. But they lack wisdom or the ingenious mind to take the knowledge passed down through the ancestral stream and find new and inventive ways to apply it. This ability to invent, to create and to evolve is the domain of the divine stark of the Gods and it is their gift to humanity. And because of this difference in the nature of the Giants and the Gods, the Gods rule. It is only due to the Gods forgetting this truth, which is caused by the corrupting agent of the Giant Loki, who dwells within their mist, are they doomed in Ragnarok.

This truth in the differences in the natures of the Gods and the Giants should be instrumental to modern-day Odinists. We must not restrict ourselves to just the Lore, and try to recreate the way the world was, as described in the Lore, but use the Lore, use this wonderful the heritage that has been passed down to us, to build upon it, to use it to expand our understanding, knowledge and wisdom.

In the Myths, Odin gains the Lore of the Giants by drinking from Mimir's Well, but he goes further, and retrieves the wisdom of the Mead of Inspiration, which is stolen by the Giants. The wisdom in the Mead is the spiritual essence, not of the Giants, but the combined magical knowledge of the Vanir and Aesir (Seither and Galdor, personified by Kvasir, who was killed by the Dwarfs. These dwarfs took his blood and used it to make the Mead. We know that Blood is symbolic of genetic—our DNA, and every atom within it. We also know that all the knowledge of existence is stored within each atom, and that each atom is more and 99.99 percent energy—Vril, the Life Force of the Gods.



It is interesting that the Giants, once in possession of the Mead of Inspiration, do not use it, but hide it away deep within the bowels of a mountain fortress, which might be metaphor for our subconscious mind. Odin, after all engages in Sex Magick of Seither when he seduces Gunnlod to gain possession of the Mead. Once in possession of this Mead he wishes to test his new-found wisdom in a contest of knowledge with the wisest of the Giants Vafthrudnir. Below I retell this tale from my book, *The Book of Balder Rising*.

Odin paced up and down his hall, Valaskjalf was unable to rest. Frigga watched her husband and knew that when he was in this way the wanderlust had overtaken him. Finally Odin stood and shouted, "I can stand it no longer, I need to travel!"

"If you must leave once more," Frigga said, "then there is nothing anyone can do to stop you."

"I would go to Jotunheim and visit Vafthrudnir in his great hall," Odin said.

"I would rather the greatest wanderer remain here with me," Frigga said. "As I understand it, Vafthrudnir is the wisest and most powerful of the Giants."

"That's why I need to visit him," Odin said. "I've traveled across the nine worlds and learned all that the Gods know. I know the future, which is the wisdom of the Gods, but I need to test my knowledge against Vafthrudnir, the riddle-master. Since the Giants know all there is to know of the past, I wish to see if my knowledge of the past is as great as his."

"Vafthrudnir is truly the wisest of the Giants, but the Giants are our enemies," Frigga said. "I fear that his wisdom might be a trap to trick you into going to Jotunheim."



"All the more reason for me to go and visit him," Odin said. "As the All-Father, I cannot remain here in Asgard. I must go and I will."

"Then go in safe passage, father of the Gods and men," Frigga said anxiously. "In both your journey to Giant-land and on your return, may no harm befall you. And may your mind be sharp and your wisdom unailing when you do word-battle with Vafthrudnir."

"Odin wrapped himself in his long blue cloak and put on his broad-brimmed hat. Taking his staff in hand, he set out from Asgard, passing across the shining rainbow bridge. Far Odin wandered, across endless plains and fields, and crossing steaming fissures, over rushing rivers and into the mountainous regions of Jotunheim he trekked. The air soon turned cold and the skies grey. Snow covered the lands and mountains loomed up in all directions. Winds now blew hard against the Terrible One. Odin pulled his hat down over his face so that no one could see that he had only one eye, as he entered a deep valley surrounded by ice-covered mountains on three sides. At the far end of the valley soared the hall of Vafthrudnir. With his staff in hand, Odin entered the hall.

Once inside, Odin called out. "Greetings, Vafthrudnir! I've traveled a great distance to meet you. Your reputation as the most wise and is known in all nine worlds. Is it true that there is none whose wisdom is greater than yours?"

Vafthrudnir appeared, huge and gigantic. “Who are you?” He demanded. “What is your name? If you come to my hall to try to best me, then you will not leave alive if you do not prove your greater wisdom.”

“My name is Gagnrad, and I have traveled a great distance to meet you,” Odin said. “In my land I am counted among the wisest. When I heard of your great wisdom, I decided to journey to your magnificent hall and compete with you in a contest of the knowledge of all things, past and future. I’m thirsty and hungry, and I seek shelter in your hall.”

“Then do not stand in the doorway,” said Vafthrudnir. “Come in and be seated. I will make you welcome, so make yourself at home. After you are refreshed, we will test our knowledge, but the one who fails the test will lose his head. I should warn you, not even Odin himself knows more than I. Do you agree to my terms?”



“I agree,” Odin said. Then Vafthrudnir brought food and drink for Odin to quench his thirst and hunger.

After Odin had his fill, Vafthrudnir called to him. “All right, Gagnrad, you have refreshed yourself, now it’s time to begin the contest.”

“Ask your first question,” Odin said.

“Every morning Day is pulled across the world by a great stallion. What is his name?”

“The stallion’s name is Skinfaxi,” Odin said. “He has a fiery mane and he brings the shining Day to men and Gods alike. Many men consider him the fairest of all horses.”

“That is correct, Gagnrad,” Vafthrudnir said, “now answer me this next question. Give me the name of the stallion that follows on the heels of Skinfaxi, and draws Night after Day has passed.”

“The name of the dark and beautiful stallion that draws Night is Hrimfaxi,” Odin said. “Foam falls from his mouths as he rides across the sky, and men call this foam the dew.”

“Can you give me the name of the great river that divides the world of the Gods from the world of the Giants?” asked Vafthrudnir.

“The mighty river is called Iving,” Odin said. “It has never frozen, and will flow unhindered until the end of time.”

“If you can answer me this, then tell me the name of the plains where Surtur and the Gods will fight?” Vafthrudnir asked.

“When Ragnarok comes, Surtur will do battle with the Gods on the plains known as Vigrid,” Odin said. “It’s a hundred miles long and just as wide.”

Vafthrudnir nodded his head and rubbed his chin as he examined his guest. “Your knowledge is great, Gagnrad, and you have answered all my questions. Now you may put questions to me.”

Odin now leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment.

“Tell me first, oh wise Vafthrudnir, from where did the earth and the heavens come from?”

“A simple question deserves a simple answer,” Vafthrudnir said. “The earth was formed from the flesh of the father of all Giants, Ymir. From his bones were shaped the mountains, from his blood the oceans were created and from his skull the sky and heavens were made.”

“Tell me now, Vafthrudnir, the origin of the moon and the sun.”

“The moon and the sun are the son and daughter of the Giant, Mundilfari,” Vafthrudnir said. “They were placed in the sky by Odin, Vili and Ve, so that men could tell the passing of time.”

“If you are so wise and know all, Vafthrudnir, then tell me this: where does Day come from, and also Night?”

“Day’s father is named Delling, and Night’s father goes by the name of Nor.”

“And why does the moon wane with different faces?” Odin asked.

“The face of the moon changes because the Gods willed it so,” Vafthrudnir said. “In this way, man can tell time.”

“And where do Winter and Summer come from?” asked Odin.

“Winter’s father is Vindsval, the Wind Cold, and Summer’s father is the gentle Svobod.”

“Now tell me who was the Giant that escaped the flood caused by the death of Ymir?” asked Odin.

“His name was Bergelmir and he was born long before Ymir died,” Vafthrudnir said. “He was the son of Thrudgelmir and the grandson of Aurgelmir.”

“And where did Aurgelmir issue from?” Odin asked.

“Aurgelmir is another name for the father of all Giants, Ymir,” Vafthrudnir said. “He was born of the venom that clotted and rose from the mixing of the heat of Muspellheim, and the yeasty ice of Niflheim. This is why we Giants are so fierce and powerful.”

“You do know a great deal,” Odin said. “Now tell me how Aurgelmir was able to conceive children if he never slept with a Giantess?”

“From under the armpits of Aurgelmir, a boy and a girl grew, and from between his legs he begot a Giant with six heads.”

“Your head seems to be filled with boundless knowledge,” Odin said. “Is your first memory still within your head? If so, what is it?”

“My first memory is of Bergelmir surviving the great flood after the death of Aurgelmir,” Vafthrudnir said. “I remember him floating in a boat.”

“I see,” Odin said. “Then tell me where the winds come from, and how they cause the waves to rock?”

“The winds originate at the top of the world,” Vafthrudnir said. “There, the great eagle, Hraesvelg, the Corpse Eater, sits and flaps his wings, causing the winds to rush over the face of the world.”

“I will ask you about the Gods, now,” Odin said. “Let me ask you about the great and noble Njord. There are many temples and shrines built in his honor, yet he is not one of the Aesir. How can Njord be one of the Gods?”

“Njord is not one of the Aesir that is true,” Vafthrudnir said, “but he is one of the Gods because he is of the Vanir. The Vanir and the Aesir have united as one race of Gods.”

Odin thought for a moment to himself. This Giant knowledge that has happened in the Past, but then, the Past is written down in an open book. Can he read what is hidden? For the Future is hidden within an unopened book? Does he know how to read what is hidden within the covers of a closed book?

“Now tell me, who are the men who will ride with Odin at the end of time?”

“They are known as the Einherjar, and they have been gathered from the fallen of the greatest and bravest heroes among the Children of the Gods. They sit and feast in the great hall of Valhalla.”

“Can you tell me of the fate of the Gods?” asked Odin. “You claim that you can read the secrets of the Runes, so you must know what fate awaits them.”

“I can read the Runes, and I do know their secrets, because I have visited all nine worlds, including Niflheim. The Gods will pass with Ragnarok, but will return upon the resurrection of Balder. Death and rebirth are the fixed laws of all Nature.”

“Tell me then from where will the sun return after Fenrir tears her apart?”

“Before Fenrir tears her apart, Alfrothul, the Elf Beam, will give birth to a daughter who will be even more beautiful than her mother. She will take her mother’s place in the new age, rising out of the sea. Light she will give to the world, and enlightenment she would give to the Children of the Gods.”

“Who are the three maidens who will watch over the world after it is reborn?”

“They are the guardians of time who will fly over Mogthrasir’s Hill three times, and will watch over the Children of the Gods.”

“Tell me who will rule over the world after it has been reborn.”

“After Surtur’s fires have died away and life returns, Vidar and Vali will live once more,” Vafthrudnir said. “They will rule along with Modi the Wrathful and Magni the Mighty, who will own Thor’s hammer and hold it in trust for their father. And over all will be Balder and by his side will be his brother Hoder.”

Odin now looked at the Giant and then spoke once more. He could see that the Giant was beginning to struggle to answer his questions on future events, for Skuld keeps tearing the webs of the Future as fast as he can read them. “Tell me how the All-Father will die at Ragnarok.”

“The wolf, Fenrir, will swallow the Father of the Gods and of Men. His son, Vidar, will avenge his death by tearing Fenrir apart.”

“And what are the names of the Children of the Gods who will survive, and how will they survive the end of the world?”

“Lif and Lifthrasir are the names of the man and woman who will survive the end of the world, and they will do so because they will take shelter within the Life Force that gave birth to them, the trunk of the World Tree itself. How will they survive after the world has ended?”

“By seeking nourishment in the Hoddmimir’s Wood. This will help the Children of the Gods to survive and replenish the world in the new age to come.”

“Who then are the Children of the Gods?”

“They are the nations descended from the son of Rig, Jarl. They are destined to live on, beyond the fall of the Gods, and through them, the Gods will return.”

“I have travel far and over many lands, and to many worlds,” Odin said. “Truly you possess not just the wisdom of the Giants, which is all things that have passed, but you also possess much of the wisdom of things that will happen, which is the wisdom of the Gods. Therefore, you should be able to tell me what Odin whispered into the ear of his most beloved son, Balder, before he burned on the funeral pyre?”

Vafthrudnir looked hard at the traveler before him, and knew instantly that it was the Terrible One himself, the all-great Odin who sat before him asking him questions. He knew that his fate was sealed long before Odin had entered his hall. He bowed his head for the eventual sword blow that would come.



“No one knows what you spoke into the ear of your son, and such knowledge will not be revealed until your son, the Beloved Balder himself reveals the secret. I have been exchanging riddles with the world’s doom, for you are Odin, and you will always be wiser than the wisest.”

“You should know that with great wisdom comes a price,” Odin said. “As I died to learn wisdom, so you must make the sacrifice for the wisdom that you possess.”

With those words, Odin struck, hacking off the head of the Giant.

In this contest, Vafthrudnir is clearly a master of past events. The Giants live in Jotunheim. Edred Thorsson describes Jotunheim as a: “Realm in constant motion, seeking to oppose and give resistance to whatever it meets. Force of dissolution and deception. Reactive power of destruction.” Growth is unheard of and there is not future, only the past and present. But Vafthrudnir claims he knows much of the future, and it is apparent that he does, but his mastery of the Magick of the Runes is limited, for after all, he is a Giant and the Giants are creatures of things that have come before. If Vafthrudnir is truly a master of Magick then he will know the unknowable, and not just things that other seerers have recorded for him to read. He ask him what Odin whispered in Balder’s hear as he laid dead.

This mystery has been revealed to me, or perhaps a part of it has, for I do believe others have also be told something of this mystery. Those of us who practice the Magick, especially both types of Magick—Galdor and Seither—which we refer to as Vrilology, have developed the powers to discover that which is hidden in the closed book.

The study of the Lore and the use of the Lore to reconstruct the old ways in the present is Gigantic in nature. For like the Giants, reconstruction is only half of the circle of completion. The other half is the future. Think of existence as a sphere cut in half. One half is the past and all that makes it up, while the other is the future and all that will make it up. They are joined by

a thin plane that is the present, for the present is the split moment in time that is always materializing and instantly moving into the past. It is the substance that holds the two halves of the sphere together, which then can roll progressively forward. But if one only concentrates on the past, you have only one half of the sphere, which wobbles helplessly like a turtle turn on its back, going nowhere, waiting for death to take it. Remember, the Giants are the past, but the God, which are half Giant, such as Odin, are both the past and the future. As Odinists, we must use the past to build new modern-day societies and find new ways to use the magick.

Odin understood this and prepared for his own rebirth after Ragnarok. The importance of the Lore is to use it as a foundation to build on, and not a shell to hide under, like the shell of a turtle. It will provide protect until someone come along and tips it over.

The tale of the contest between Odin and Vafthrudnir has many lessons, and one of them is that we must not restrict ourselves to merely memorizing the Lore and reconstructing the past in the present. This spells doom and if we do, we will lose our heads, just as surely as Vafthrudnir did. Like Odin, we must look forward and this means creating an organic living community of kindreds who build on the past, but explore new and inventive ways to use the Lore and magick that the Gods have preserved for us to master. Those who restrict themselves to only reliving the past, to walk in shadows of the past, suffer from what I call the Vafthrudnir Syndrome.