Creatures of Norse Mythology

Don Nardo

Discovering Norse Mythology

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Origins of Norse Mythology

the globe. Devout believers in a group of quaint, colorful gods, the Vikings held that the entire universe existed within a single, incredibly gigantic tree. Appropriately called the World Tree, it contained numerous continent-sized realms. There was a realm for the gods (Asgard) and one for humans (Midgard). The rest of the realms were populated by all manner of creatures, from giants and dwarfs to ghosts, zombies, dragons, and other mystical beings. Some of these creatures were seen and others unseen, says Daniel McCoy, a noted expert on Norse culture. Most, he points out, "were less powerful than the gods, but they nevertheless played an important role in making the Norse universe what it was. Some of these beings were largely benevolent. Some were

Dragons and Sea Monsters

All the Viking sailors who saw it up close agreed that the *finngalkin*—a being one-third human and two-thirds dragon—was nothing less than hideous. According to the thirteenth-century Icelandic adventure tale *The Saga of Arrow Odd*, the creature, which was clearly female, "had a human head with immense fangs and its tail was both long and stout and its claws were remarkably large. It had a sword in each claw and both were large and gleaming in the sunlight."[8]

finngalkin
A mythical Norse monster that looks like a cross between a human and a dragon

The frightening finngalkin charged out of the forest and attacked a large group of Norse sailors who had landed on a beach in a largely uninhabited sector of eastern England. Taking the men by surprise, the saga's narrative states, "she howled menacingly and killed five men in the first attack. She cut down two of them with her swords, a third she bit with her teeth and two she struck with her tail. Within a few minutes, she had killed sixty men.[9]

Some of the survivors rushed back to their ship, which was anchored offshore. There, they told their leader, Odd of Berurjod, nicknamed Arrow Odd, about the awful attack. He gazed toward the shore and saw the monster, which was chasing several of his men along the beach.

Horrified and distraught by the loss of so many men, Odd detected the highlights of his life flashing before his eyes, re-

minding him of how he had gotten to this terrifying moment in time. Born in the Norwegian town of Berurjod, as a young man he had encountered a scary old witch who had predicted he would live for more than three centuries. He would become a famous Viking raider who would loot lands from Greece to Russia to England, she said. "Your reputation will go around the world," she added. "But travel as far as you try, you'll die here, in Berurjod."[10] Moreover, the old hag said, Odd would be killed by the skull of a horse named Faxi. Hearing this, Odd tracked down that steed and killed and buried it. That act, he reasoned, was bound to negate the prophecy, ensuring his safety.

In the years that followed, Odd had indeed traveled around the known world and experienced many adventures. Yet none had come close to being as dangerous as the ongoing attack of the finngalkin. Determined to avenge his lost followers, he hurried to the beach and personally confronted the dragon-like giant. Using his bow, Odd managed to send an arrow into one of the creature's eyes. But the beast kept coming at him. It charged so fast, the saga says, that he was unable to use his bow. "Swiftly he drew his sword . . . and cut off the beast's thick tail when it was going to strike him. He kept one hand up so she could not bite at him as she ran toward the woods screaming horribly. Odd then shot another [arrow]. It hit the beast . . . in the heart . . . and the finngalkin fell forward quite dead."[11]

Ominous Serpentine Symbolism

In spite of his impressive victory over the dragon-like beast on the beach, Odd eventually met his own end at the hands of a much smaller reptilian cousin of the finngalkin. After having lived for over three centuries, Odd returned to his hometown. And when out walking one day, he tripped over a half-buried object and fell. The object was the remnants of the skull of the horse Faxi. A poisonous snake that had made its home inside the skull suddenly leaped out and bit Odd, who swiftly perished. The prophecy made by the witch long before was thereby fulfilled.

Odd's extensive adventures, including run-ins with serpentine sea monsters, illustrate the array of reptilian creatures in Norse mythology. Today mythologists and other writers tend to make a distinction between a dragon, having legs and wings, and legless, more snakelike serpents large and small. However, the medieval Norse usually did not make that sort of distinction. Terms such as *dragon*, *serpent*, and *sea monster* were more or less interchangeable, and it was a creature's size and personal characteristics that set it apart from other dangerous creatures.

One point that Vikings everywhere could agree on was that the existence of and danger posed by such reptilian monsters were not random or accidental. The belief was that they existed

Sea serpents and other reptilian creatures were common in Norse mythology.

as ominous symbols, or reminders, of certain key aspects of life. Dragons, for example, were potent symbols of power, which explains why many Viking rulers chose images of those creatures to decorate their castles, family crests, and shields. Images of dragons often also stood for good luck, bravery, and protection from evil spirits.

Similarly, sea monsters, related to dragons through their reptilian characteristics, evoked compelling images and symbols that individuals and society as a whole took to heart. A good example is Jormungander, the so-called World Serpent, an offspring of the trickster god Loki. It got that name because over time it grew enormous, big enough for its body to encircle entire continents. That creature figured prominently in the famous, dire prophecy of Ragnarok, the catastrophe in which the gods will die and the world will collapse into nothingness. Jormungander will fight alongside the giants and other evil creatures intent on annihilating the gods and humans. As a result, in Viking eyes the World Serpent stood for large-scale cosmic destruction and the end of the world.

A Fateful Fishing Trip

Based on their myths, the Norse also recognized that the character most often associated with that gigantic reptilian beast was the thunder god Thor. Over the course of many centuries, the two became archenemies. And considering the great serpent's predicted role in the coming apocalypse, Thor took every opportunity he could to try to eliminate the creature.

Perhaps the best-known example occurred when the gods were planning to hold a party for the sea deities Ran and Aegir. A great deal of ale would be consumed in the gathering, and therefore an exceptionally large kettle would be needed to brew that beverage. The only being who had a kettle big enough was a giant named Hymir. And Thor volunteered to go to Jotunheim and obtain the object.

Like all Jotnar, Hymir feared Thor's hammer. So when the thunder god arrived at Hymir's castle, the giant was on his best

Arrow Odd's Monsters

The Icelandic saga about the Viking raider Arrow Odd is one of the few surviving Norse literary works that mentions more than one kind of reptilian monster. The narrator describes not only the dragon-like finngalkin, but also two huge sea creatures—the *hafgufa* and *lyngbakr*. The hafgufa was said to possess a tremendously large mouth, with which it could devour people and entire ships. In contrast, the lyngbakr looked like a small island floating in the sea. And when human fishermen and sailors walked on it, the beast dove downward, carrying them to their deaths. In Arrow Odd's saga, that character's son, Vignir, recalls various supposed facts about both creatures, saying:

> One is named hafgufa, the other lyngbakr. The latter is the greatest of all whales in the world, but hafgufa is the biggest of monsters created in the ocean. It is her nature that she swallows both men and ships and whales and all that she can reach. . . . That sound that we sailed through was the gap between her jaws, and her nose and lower jaw were the rocks you saw in the ocean, but lyngbakr was the island that sank [taking several men with it].

Quoted in Brian H. Seibert, trans., *The Saga of Arrow Odd*, SeiberTeck. https://seiberteck.com.

behavior. Hymir had his chef prepare Thor a huge feast, and the god consumed so much that he practically emptied the castle's pantry. The irritated giant told his guest that one way to replenish the food stores would be for them to go fishing.

The next morning, Thor and Hymir climbed into the giant's fishing trawler and tried their luck in the nearby coastal waters. Hymir caught two hefty whales and suggested that they return to the castle. But Thor refused and rowed the vessel farther out to sea. Growing fearful, Hymir objected, warning that Jormungander was known to lurk in the deeper waters. Thor responded that this was exactly what he was counting on because he hoped to slay that very creature.

Daniel McCoy summarizes what happened about an hour later, saying that the choppy water suddenly and ominously turned calm. Then,

> Thor felt a mighty tug on his line. As he reeled it in, a violent rumbling shook the boat and whipped the waves. The giant grew pale with terror, but Thor persisted. . . . When the serpent's head, with the hook in its venom-dripping mouth, at last came up above the water, Thor reached for his hammer. At this moment, Hymir panicked and cut the line. The howling snake slunk back down into the ocean.[12]

Not surprisingly, Thor was furious. He punched Hymir in the face and tossed him overboard to drown. The god then gathered up the captured whales, returned to the castle, collected the oversized kettle, and journeyed back to Asgard. As for the World Serpent, though it had managed to escape Thor's grasp that day,

After going out to deeper waters, Thor managed to get Jormungander on his line, but Hymir panicked and cut the line, leaving Thor furious.

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