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Old Norse Mythology Influencing *Attack on Titan*

FOOSH! A man in a cloak swings around in the trees, circling a giant. *SHINK!* The man lands a blow on the giant, but it still stands. The man circles the giant as if he is flying looking for an opening. “There!” he says to himself and strikes the giant where it is vulnerable, the giant falls to its death. This could possibly be a Norse god attacking and killing a giant, however it could also be a scene from *Attack on Titan*. Norse mythology influences the artist of *Attack on Titan* when he writes his story. I will be looking at how the characters Ymir, the Titans, Erwin, and Hange, in *Attack on Titan*, are influenced by Norse mythology.

Attack on Titan is a Japanese manga, or comic, series written by Hajime Isayama. It was started in September 2009 and is still currently being written and published by Kodansha, a Japanese publishing company. The series is set in a post-apocalyptic world where humans live in cities surrounded by three walls, which is a defense against the Titans that are trying to kill them. The story follows a teenager and his friends who are trying to eliminate all the Titans and find out the truth about Titans and humanity. The main characters the story follows are in the Survey Corps, soldiers that venture outside the walls, and are most actively involved in Titan combat.

The first character that was noticeably inspired by Norse Mythology is Ymir Fritz, she is based upon the jötunn, or giant, Ymir. In *Attack on Titan*, Ymir Fritz is the first person who is

granted the power of the Titan, and is therefore the first Titan. This is similar to Ymir in Norse mythology, who, according to *The Seeress's Prophecy* (stanza 3), is the first being in existence, as well the first giant. It is also mentioned in *Grimnir's Sayings* (stanzas 40-41), that the world was created from Ymir's body. In *Attack on Titan*, while little is known about Ymir Fritz and her Titan ability, it was said that she is responsible for creating the world the humans live in, and making barren lands fertile. According to Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning* (pages 10-11), the descendants of Ymir are frost-giants, and when he sweat in his sleep, he produced some descendants. Ymir Fritz is similar to the Norse Ymir again in this case; her descendants are called the "People of Ymir" and have the ability to transform into Titans. In addition to the names of her descendants, when she died, Ymir's soul was split into nine, and so nine descendants of Ymir would be able to harness and control the power of the Titan.

The first noticeable difference between Ymir Fritz and the mythological Ymir their gender, where Ymir Fritz is a woman, revered as a goddess, Ymir is a male ice giant. Ymir Fritz was probably made a female in *Attack on Titan* rather than a male, to help develop another female character in the story. Ymir Fritz, before she became a Titan, was the queen of her people and was generous and lady like. The character that is being developed in the story, is urged to be like Ymir Fritz when she grows up, to be loving and lady like. Another difference between the two is the idea of being the *first*. Where Ymir is the first being in existence, Ymir Fritz was not the first being in existence, only the first Titan, and she only gained the power of the Titan when she was trying to protect her people. A reason these changes happened to Ymir Fritz is for the plot of the story. With Ymir Fritz being the first Titan, but not the first being is to help establish relations between two different kinds of people in the story, the Eldians, the "Subjects of Ymir",

and the Marley nation. The conflict between the two people is a plot point that is driving the story now.

Previously, I have stated that the descendants of Ymir Fritz are related to Titans, in a similar way, a lot of the Norse gods, like Odin and Thor, are related to giants. Titans are transformed Eldians, or descendants of Ymir, and roam outside the walls in *Attack on Titan* and have nearly exterminated the human race. The remnants of humanity also possess the ability to transform into Titans as they are Eldians as well. So, humanity, the Titans, and those who possess the power of Titans are all related. In a similar way, the Norse gods and giants are all related, Bur, son of Buri, married the giantess Bestla and had three children, one of them being Odin, who is sometimes called All-Father. Odin is considered the father of the gods, and is father to many of them, so all his children are also part giant. The Norse gods, who are part giant are in a war against the giants. In *Attack on Titan*, the humans, who are part Titan, are in a constant battle with the Titans.

Knowing that Titans are related to humans, and gods are related to giants, we can see more similarities between them based on their interactions. In *Attack on Titan* the Titans and humans are in a constant conflict with each other, in a similar way the giants and gods are also in a constant state of war. However, there are a few cases where the two groups did not outright attack each other. According to Snorri in *Gylfaginning* (pages 37-47), Thor does not outright kill Útgarda-Loki and even travel together and share provisions. Even after it is revealed that Útgarda-Loki has tricked Thor, they do not outright kill each other. After their encounter, Thor goes fishing for the Midgard Serpent. He goes fishing with the giant Hymir, and without his help Thor would not have gotten close to the Midgard Serpent. Thor does not outright kill Hymir, but rather uses him to his advantage. In a similar case in *Attack on Titan*, not all the Titans attack

humans, and some Titans who can control the power live among the humans. Looking at one character who harnessed the power of the Titan and is in the Survey Corps, Eren. He often helps the Survey Corps and humanity by restoring a broken wall or killing other Titans. Like Thor used Hymir, the Survey Corps uses Eren to gain an advantage against the other Titans that are trying to kill them.

A difference between the Titans and humans is the ability to control the power. Not all the Titans have control of the Titan power, the transformed Eldians without control, will always try to eat a human. This is different from Norse mythology where the gods and giants would get along at times – and even intermarry – and the giants would not attack every god they see, every time they see them. This change was probably made to increase the dramatic effect on the reader, to have mindless beings attack the remnants of humanity, the reader wanted them gone too. However, when it was revealed that the Titans were once human, it had an impact on the reader, it took them back and made them question what they wanted and what the characters in the story wanted. One character that rarely shows emotions was even clearly distressed about learning this. This helped further develop the characters with how they reacted to this news. This revelation also added to the mystery of the Titans and expanded the story by answering the question of what a Titan is, but giving the reader a new question of “why?” Another difference is the look of the Titans and giants. While all the Titans have a humanoid figure, sometimes deformed, not all the giants in Norse mythology had a humanoid shape. Notably, Fenrir, Loki’s wolf offspring, who is a wolf. Isayama probably avoided making other creatures Titans to reduce the complexity of the story so he did not have to explain why other creatures were attacking humans. Doing this also gives the humans in his world less things trying to kill them. Having another enemy for the humans would detract from the story he is trying to tell. However,

Isayama does include a wide variety of Titans of all shapes and sizes, including a Titan that is covered in hair and is referred to as the *Beast Titan*.

As I stated above, Odin is technically part giant, so it is not absurd to associate a human character in *Attack on Titan* with him. A character that can fulfill this role is the commander of the Survey Corps, Erwin Smith. Erwin, like the other remnants of humanity, is one of the descendants of Ymir, and is technically part Titan, like the way Odin is part giant. Where Odin is the leader of the Norse gods, Erwin fulfills a similar role as leader of the Survey Corps, the leader of the humans that fight the Titans. Erwin shares other traits with Odin, like being extremely knowledgeable and is continuously seeking more knowledge. Erwin went as far as putting himself in harm's way, to save a boy, Eren; however, Eren held the key to the truth of the titans, and he was willing to sacrifice himself for it. In a similar way, Odin self-sacrificed for knowledge multiple times, like in *Sayings of The High One* (stanzas 138-145) when Odin hung from a tree to learn runic magic. Another instance where the two are similar, is their roles they fulfill. Where Odin is a god of war, among other things, Erwin fulfills a similar role to this. With Erwin being the commander of the Survey Corps, he oversees the military branch that brings the fight to the Titans, the one initiating the war with the Titans. In a highly-anticipated battle between the Survey Corps and the Titans, Erwin leads the attack, where he and most of the members of the Survey Corps are killed. This mirrors Ragnarök, the final battle between the gods and giants.

A difference between Erwin and Odin, is the disguises or lack thereof. Where Odin is often in disguise, Erwin is never in disguise and only wore a hood when it was raining. The reason for this difference is because rather than a god who can do whatever he wants whenever he wants, Erwin is the commander of a military branch and must act as a face for the Survey

Corps to the public. A difference between these two final battles are the survivors. In *Attack on Titan*, some members still live after the battle, whereas in Ragnarök, all the gods die. This change was made so the story would continue, and would not be a gloomy ending for the reader if everyone had died. It also allowed the author to not have to introduce new characters and re-developed them in the new Titan free world.

Even though the final battle happened, that does not mean that there is no future, in either story. In the *Seeress's Prophecy* (stanzas 56-60) it is mentioned that after Ragnarök, a new world will be found again. In addition to this, John Lillow talks about time and that it is cylindrical and the world is being formed and reformed. So, it is not a farfetched idea to say that Odin is reborn over and over again. In *Attack on Titan*, Hange Zöe became the new commander of the Survey Corps, after Erwin died, they took over Erwin's place and began to fulfill his role. Hange shares similar qualities to Erwin, as in both are extremely smart and seek out more knowledge. Hange seeks out knowledge by experimenting on captured Titans. After the battle with the Titans, Hange came out sharing an aesthetic look with Odin, they lost an eye. In addition to this, Hange is even more Odin-like than Erwin was in that fact their gender is ambiguous, and the author wants to keep it this way. We have seen in some articles like Richard Auld's paper *The Psychological and Mythic Unity of the God, Odin* and Brit Solli's article *Queering the Gods* that Odin often has feminine traits as well as masculine. This does not make Odin a woman, however according to Solli, he is like a bridge between the two genders. In a similar way that Odin is a bridge between the two genders, Hange is also a bridge with their gender ambiguity.

Hange's gender ambiguity does not necessarily make them a bridge like Odin connecting the two genders. Hange just blurs the line and they do not necessarily bring them together like Odin or a shaman would. However, Hange's gender identity may have been left out because the

author does not think that it is important to the story he is telling. It is also worth noting, that in Japan gendered pronouns are not used, and when a Japanese manga is translated, translators stick in these pronouns so that it makes sense to English readers. Since the author of *Attack on Titan* does not find significance in Hange's gender, that may be why he instructed the editors to make sure their gender is never revealed.

Norse mythology is a fascinating topic and it is no wonder that many people would be interested in it and want to include it in their works like Marvel attempts, and Neil Gaiman did in his Sandman comic books. Even Japanese artists can be influenced by Norse mythology, as we can see with Hajime Isayama and *Attack on Titan*. He pulled inspiration from the Norse giants and turned them into Titans, and even the Norse gods inspired some individual characters. Every artist takes creative freedom while making their works, and Isayama is no different. While he may have taken some freedom to make the characters his own, I believe he successfully portrayed the gods and creatures through his characters and the conflict they face.

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