Germanic religion and mythology

Germanic religion and mythology, complex of stories, lore, and beliefs about the gods and the nature of the cosmos developed by the Germanic-speaking peoples before their conversion to Christianity.

Germanic culture extended, at various times, from the Black Sea to Greenland, or even the North American continent. Germanic religion played an important role in shaping the civilization of Europe. But since the Germanic peoples of the Continent and of England were converted to Christianity in comparatively early times, it is not surprising that less is known about the gods whom they used to worship and the forms of their religious cults than about those of Scandinavia, where Germanic religion survived until relatively late in the Middle Ages.

Sources

Classical and early medieval sources

The works of classical authors, written mostly in Latin and occasionally in Greek, throw some light on the religion of Germanic peoples; however, their interest in the religious practices of Germanic tribes remains limited to its direct relevance to their narrative, as when Strabo describes the gory sacrifice of Roman prisoners by the Cimbri at the end of the 2nd century bce.

For all his knowledge of the Celts, Caesar had no more than a superficial knowledge of Germans. He made some judicious observations in *Commentarii de bello Gallico* about their social and political organization, but his remarks on their religion were rather perfunctory. Contrasting Germans with the Celts of Gaul, Caesar claimed that the Germans had no druids (i.e., organized priesthood), nor zeal for sacrifice, and counted as gods only the Sun, the fire god (Vulcan or *Vulcanus*), and the Moon. His limited information accounts for Caesar's assumption of the poverty of the Germanic religion and the partial inaccuracy and incompleteness of his statement.

Tacitus, on the contrary, provided a lucid picture of customs and religious practices of continental Germanic tribes in his *Germania*, written circa 98 ce. He describes some of their rituals and occasionally names a god or goddess. While Tacitus presumably never visited Germany, his information was partly based on direct sources; he also used older works, now lost.

Early medieval records

As the power of Rome declined, records grew poorer, and nothing of great importance survives from before the *Getica*, a history of the Goths written by the Gothic historian Jordanes circa 550; it was based on a larger (lost) work of Cassiodorus, which also incorporated the earlier work of Ablavius. The *Getica* incorporates valuable records of Gothic tradition, the origin of the Goths, and some important remarks about the gods whom the Goths worshipped and the forms of their sacrifices, human and otherwise.

A story about the origin of the Lombards is given in a tract, *Origo gentis Langobardorum* ("Origin of the Nation of Lombards"), of the late 7th century. It relates how the goddess Frea, wife of Godan (Wodan), tricked her husband into granting the Lombards victory over the Vandals. The story shows that the divine pair, recognizable from Scandinavian sources as Odin and Frigg, was known to the Lombards at this early time. A rather similar story about this pair is told in a Scandinavian source. The Lombard Paul the Deacon, working late in the 8th or early in the 9th century, repeated the tale just mentioned in his fairly comprehensive *Historia*

Langobardorum (“History of the Lombards”). Paul used written sources available to him and seemed also to draw upon Lombard tradition in prose and verse.

The Venerable Bede, writing his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (“Ecclesiastical History of the English People”) early in the 8th century, showed much interest in the conversion of the English and some in their earlier religion. The lives of Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries who worked among Germanic peoples on the Continent (e.g., Columbanus, Willibrord, and Boniface) provide some information about pagan customs and sacrifices.

The first detailed document touching upon the early religion of Scandinavia is the biography by St. Rembert (or Rimbert) of St. Ansgar (or Anskar), a 9th-century missionary and now patron saint of Scandinavia, who twice visited the royal seat, Björkö, in eastern Sweden, and noticed some religious practices, among them the worship of a dead king. Ansgar was well received by the Swedes, but it was much later that they adopted Christianity.

Some two centuries later, about 1072, Adam of Bremen compiled his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (*History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*), which included a description of the lands in the north, then part of the ecclesiastical province of Hamburg. Adam’s work is particularly rich in descriptions of the festivals and sacrifices of the Swedes, who were still largely pagan in his day.

German and English vernacular sources

Learned sources, such as those just mentioned, may be supplemented by a few written in vernacular in continental Germany and England. Among the most interesting are two charms, the so-called Merseburg Charms, found in a manuscript from circa 900, in alliterating verse. The charms appear to be of great antiquity, and the second, intended to cure sprains, contains the names of seven deities. Four of these are known from Scandinavian sources—namely, Wodan (Odin), Friia (Frigg), Volla (Fulla), and Balder—but *balder* could merely designate the lord and apply to Wodan’s companion Phol, an otherwise unidentified god. Sinthgunt (Sinhtgunt in the manuscript), the sister of Sunna (“Sun”), could be a name for the Moon.

A manuscript of the 9th century contains a baptismal vow in the Saxon dialect, probably dating from the 8th century. The postulant is made to renounce the Devil and all his works, as well as three gods, Thunaer (Donar/Thor), Wôden (Wodan/Odin), and Saxnôt, whose name has been associated with Seaxneat, who appears as the son of Wôden in the genealogy of the kings of Essex. Saxnôt is undoubtedly a Saxon tribal god, but it is not clear whether the second element of his name means “companion” or refers to “(sacrificial) cattle.”

Vernacular sources in Old English are rich, but reveal little about the pre-Christian religion. The poem *Beowulf* is based upon heroic traditions, ultimately of Scandinavian origin, but in spite of its rather thorough Christianization, it retains a number of striking Germanic elements in its symbolism and contents. The fight of Beowulf against the monsters from the dark is paralleled by the struggle of Scandinavian heroes against trolls. The same heroism and defiance of death that characterize Germanic warrior ethics are found in minor historical poems, such as the *Battle of Brunanburh* and the *Battle of Maldon*. Old English literature also includes numerous charms intended as safeguards against illnesses and misfortunes, but these can hardly be called religious. In the 9th century *Runic Poem,* an old tradition about the god Ing has clearly been retained. Wôden (Odin) is also mentioned repeatedly in Old English sources; he is frequently named among ancestors of the royal houses.

Scandinavian literary sources

The greater part of scholarly knowledge of Germanic religion comes from literary sources written in Scandinavia. These sources are mostly written in the Old Norse language, and they are nearly all preserved in manuscripts written in Iceland from the 12th to 14th century or in later copies of manuscripts written at that period. This implies a surviving tradition and an antiquarian revival in that distant outpost of Scandinavian culture.

The oldest of the sources found in the Icelandic manuscripts are in verse. Although remembered and written down in Iceland, some of these verses originated elsewhere, some in Norway and a few in Denmark and Sweden. Some of them may well be older than the settlement of Iceland, which took place toward the end of the 9th century. The Icelanders remained pagan until the year 999 or 1000.

The Icelandic manuscripts are written either in Eddic or in skaldic verse. The Eddic poetry is mostly composed in free alliterative measures, much like that of the Old English *Beowulf*. Much of it is preserved in a manuscript now called the *Elder Edda*, or *Poetic Edda*, written in Iceland circa 1270 and containing material centuries older. The meaning of the name *Edda* is disputed; it was not originally applied to this book but to another mentioned below.

The *Elder Edda* consists of a number of lays, which may be divided into two classes, the mythological and the heroic. The mythological poems contain stories about the northern Germanic gods; words of wisdom; a cosmogony, depicting the beginning of the world; and an apocalyptic description of the Ragnarök, the end of the ancient Scandinavian world. There is much controversy among scholars about the date and place of origin of several of the lays preserved in the *Edda* and minor collections. The first lay is the "Völuspá" ("Prophecy of the Seeress") which, in about 65 short stanzas, covers the history of the world of gods from the beginning to the Ragnarök. In spite of its clearly pagan theme, the poem reveals Christian influence in its imagery. The scenery described is that of Iceland, and it is commonly thought that it was composed in Iceland about the year 1000, when Icelanders perceived the fall of their ancient gods and the approach of Christianity.

The "Hávamál" ("Words of the High One") is a heterogeneous collection of aphorisms, homely wisdom, and counsels, as well as magic charms, ascribed to Odin. It contains at least five separate sections, some of which definitely point to their origin in Norway in the Viking age (9th–10th century) by their scenery and view of life. Of interest are the myths about Odin's erotic affairs, illustrating his cynical remarks about man's relation to woman, especially his amorous adventure leading to the theft of the precious mead. Particularly important is the account of Odin's hanging himself on the world tree, Yggdrasill, a name apparently meaning "Odin's Horse."

In another poem Odin engages in a contest of wits with an immensely wise giant (Vafthrúdnir). The poem, in the form of question and answer, tells of the cosmos, gods, giants, the beginning of the world, and its end. The other lays of the first section of the *Elder Edda* deal essentially with the adventures of the gods, especially Thor's relations with the giants, such as when he goes fetching the brewing kettle, fishing for the Midgard-Serpent, and recovering his hammer Mjölnir.
The "Lokasenna" ("The Flyting of Loki"), which sharply criticizes the behaviour of the major Scandinavian gods and goddesses, perhaps on the model of Lucian's *Assembly of the Gods*, is presumably a late addition, written circa 1200. Similarly, the political implications in the "Rígsthula" suggest that this poem about the divine origin of social stratification dates at least to the 13th century.

The second section of the *Elder Edda* tells of traditional Germanic heroes, such as Sigurd (Siegfried) or Völundr (Wayland the Smith). Many of the stories told there are also known from continental

Germany and England, but the Norse sources preserve them in an older and purer form. They are of some interest for the study of religion because the gods often intervene in the lives of heroes.

The Icelandic and, to a lesser extent, the Norwegian manuscripts of the 13th and 14th centuries contain a great bulk of poetry of a quite different kind. This is commonly, if unjustifiably, called skaldic poetry. The skaldic verse forms were perhaps devised in Norway in the 9th century. They differ fundamentally from the traditional Germanic and Eddic forms in that the syllables are strictly counted and the lines must end in a given form. The skalds also used a complicated system of alliteration, as well as internal rhyme and consonance. With all these constraints, their short, eight-line strophes, falling neatly into four-line half strophes, are often difficult to understand because of the complexity of the syntax and of an abstruse diction, making a very extensive use of periphrastic metaphors called kennings. These phrases, e.g., "Sif's hair" or "the otter's ransom" for "gold," allude to specific myths, and their testimony is most reliable to assess pagan worship. Skaldic poetry is often composed in praise of chieftains of Norway and other Scandinavian lands. Its authors are frequently named, and their approximate date is known.

After the Icelanders were converted to Christianity, much of their ancient poetry survived this religious change, as did traditions about pagan gods and their worship. Icelanders of the 12th century traveled widely and were among the most lettered people in Europe, studying and translating homilies, saints' lives, and other learned literature of Europe. During the 13th century there was a revival of the Icelanders' interest in the practices of their pagan ancestors, as well as in those of their kinsfolk in Norway and, to a lesser extent, in Sweden.

The name chiefly associated with this revival is that of Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). Snorri acquired great wealth and received the best education available. He became a powerful man in Icelandic politics, and political intrigue led to his assassination in 1241. The first of Snorri's works and one of the most memorable was his *Prose Edda*, written circa 1220. It is to this book that the title *Edda*, whatever its meaning, originally belonged.

It is likely that Snorri wrote the various sections of this book in an order opposite to that which they now have. He began with a poem exemplifying 102 different forms of verse, addressed to Haakon, the young king of Norway, and his uncle Earl Skúli Baardson. He then furnished a section entitled "Skáldskaparmál" ("Poetic Diction"), explaining and illustrating the abstruse allusions to gods and ancient heroes in the poetry of the skalds. After this, he wrote an introduction to the mythology of the north in the "Gylfaginning" ("Beguiling of Gylfi"), a section describing all of the major gods and their functions. Snorri worked partly from Eddic and skaldic poetry still extant, but partly from sources that are now lost. He presents a clear, if not altogether reliable, account of the gods, the creation of the world, and Ragnarök.

Another important work ascribed to Snorri is the *Heimskringla* ("Orb of the World"), a history of the kings of Norway from the beginning to the mid-12th century. The first section of this book, the "Ynglinga saga," is of particular interest, for in it, Snorri described the descent of the kings of Norway from the royal house of Sweden, the Ynglingar, who, in their turn, were said to descend from gods. Snorri used such written sources as were available; he also relied on skaldic poems, some of which were very old. Snorri visited Norway twice and Sweden once, and he probably used popular traditions that he heard in both countries.

About the beginning of the 13th century Icelanders began to write so-called family sagas, or Icelanders' sagas; i.e., lives of their ancestors who had settled in Iceland in the late 9th century, and lived through the 10th and 11th centuries. A good deal had already been written about these people

in summary form by Ari the Learned (c. 1067–1148) and other scholars of the early 12th century, but much more had been preserved in tradition handed down in verse and prose.

The reliability of family sagas as sources of history has long been debated and no simple answer can be given. Each saga has to be studied separately, with a view not only to the author's sources but also to his aims. Some of the authors were antiquarians and tried to relate faithfully the history of a district, a family, or a hero; others simply entertained by writing historical fiction.

About the time when the first family sagas were written, the Dane Saxo Grammaticus, secretary of Absalon, archbishop of Lund, was compiling in Latin his great history of the Danes (*Gesta Danorum*). The first nine books of this work deal with the prehistory of the Danes and are actually a history of the ancient gods and heroes. Interpreting the old religion euhemeristically (i.e., by reducing the gods to the level of distinguished men), Saxo regarded the pagan gods chiefly as crafty men of old. Some of his sources may have been Danish traditions and poetry now lost, but he derived much of his information from vagrant Icelanders, of whom he speaks with some respect.

Material such as Saxo used was also used by Icelanders some generations later in the so-called heroic sagas (*fornaldarsǫgur*). Sagas of this kind describe the adventures of heroes who lived, or were supposed to have lived, in Scandinavia or on the Continent before Iceland was peopled. The gods, and particularly Odin, are frequently said to take part in the affairs of men, but, since few of the heroic sagas were written before the 14th century and the aim of their authors was often entertainment rather than instruction, these sagas can be used as sources only with utmost discrimination.

Other sources

Archaeology

The archaeological finds of Scandinavia are rich, and information about religious beliefs may be drawn especially from the grave goods and forms of burial. It may, in fact, be possible to trace continuity of belief from the Bronze Age to the Viking age in the 9th and 10th centuries. Archaeological finds, however, are difficult to interpret from a religious point of view. The numerous petroglyphs of southern Scandinavia, dating to the 2nd millennium bce, attest to an extensive sun cult and prevalent fertility rites. Other early Bronze Age finds such as the Trundholm chariot of the sun confirm these religious practices. Ship or boat graves were initially meant to carry the buried or cremated remains of those put in them to the otherworld, but such practices could later have become purely conventional.

A number of small images in silver or bronze, dating from the Viking age, have also been found in various parts of Scandinavia. They show Thor with his hammer or a fertility god with full erection, perhaps Freyr; frequently found is a silver hammer, the symbol of Thor, often worn as an amulet, like the hundreds of gold medals or bracteates, representing Germanic deities worshiped on the Continent and in Scandinavia in the 5th–6th century.

Runic inscriptions

The runic alphabet was used throughout the Germanic world beginning about the 1st century ce. The runes had magical and sacral significance. Occasionally one god or another is named; the god Thor may be called upon to hallow a grave.

Place-names

Theophoric place-names (derived from or compounded with the name of a god) are found in all Germanic lands. Such names supplement the limited information available concerning pagan religion in Continental Germany and England. The theophoric place-names of Norway and Sweden are richer and have been carefully sifted. The evidence drawn from them must, however, be handled with caution. A name such as Thorslundr ("Thor's Grove") does not necessarily imply that Thor was worshiped there, for names are often transferred by settlers from one place to another, as from England to America and, in the Viking age, from the Scandinavian mainland to Iceland. Groups of theophoric place-names may, however, provide evidence of the cult of one god or another.

Mythology

The beginning of the world of giants, gods, and men

The story of the beginning is told, with much variation, in three poems of the *Elder Edda*, and a synthesis of these is given by Snorri Sturluson in his *Prose Edda*. Snorri adds certain details that he must have taken from sources now lost.

Defective as it is, the account of the "Völuspá" appears to be the most rational description of the cosmogony. The story is told by an age-old seeress who was reared by primeval giants. In the beginning there was nothing but Ginnungagap, a void charged with magic force. Three gods, Odin and his brothers, raised up the earth, presumably from the sea into which it will ultimately sink back. The sun shone on the barren rocks and the earth was overgrown with green herbage.

Later, Odin and two other gods came upon two lifeless tree trunks, Askr and Embla, on the shore. They endowed them with breath, reason, hair, and fair countenance, thus creating the first human couple.

A quite different story is told in the didactic poem "Vafthrúdnismál" ("The Lay of Vafthrúdnir"). The poet ascribes his ancestry to a primal giant, Aurgelmir, who sometimes goes by the name Ymir. The giant grew out of the venom-cold drops spurted by the stormy rivers called Élivágar. One of the giant's legs begat a six-headed son with the other leg, and under his arms grew a maid and a youth. The earth was formed from the body of the giant Ymir who, according to Snorri, was slaughtered by Odin and his brothers. Ymir's bones were the rocks, his skull the sky, and his blood the sea. Another didactic poem, "Grímnismál" ("The Lay of Grímnir [Odin]"), adds further details. The trees were the giant's hair and his brains the clouds. Snorri quotes the three poetic sources just mentioned, giving a more coherent account and adding some details. One of the most interesting is the reference to the primeval cow Audhumla (Auðumla), formed from drops of melting rime. She was nourished by licking salty, rime-covered stones. Four rivers of milk flowed from her udders and thus she fed the giant Ymir. The cow licked the stones into the shape of a man; this was Buri (Búri), who was to be grandfather of Odin and his brothers. The theme of the creation of the world from parts of the body of a primeval being is also found in Indo-Iranian tradition and may belong to the Indo-European heritage in Germanic religion.

A central point in the cosmos is the evergreen ash, Yggdrasill, whose three roots stretch to the worlds of death, frost-giants, and men. A hart (stag) is biting its foliage, its trunk is rotting, and a cruel dragon is gnawing its roots. When Ragnarök approaches, the tree will shiver and, presumably, fall. Beneath the tree stands a well, the fount of wisdom. Odin got a drink from this well and had to leave one of his eyes as a pledge.

The gods

Old Norse sources name a great number of deities. The evidence of place-names suggests that one cult succeeded another. Names, especially those in southeastern Norway and southern Sweden, suggest that there was once widespread worship of a god Ull (Ullr). Indeed, an early poem reports an oath on the ring of Ull, suggesting that he was once one of the highest gods, at least in some areas. Beyond that, little is known about Ull; he was god of the bow and snowshoes, and, according to Saxo Grammaticus, who calls him Ollerus, he temporarily replaced Odin when the latter was banned from his throne.

The gods can be divided roughly into two tribes, Aesir and Vanir. At one time, according to fairly reliable sources, there was war between the Aesir and the Vanir, but when neither side could score a decisive victory they made peace and exchanged hostages. In this way, the specialized fertility gods, the Vanir, Njörd (Njörðr), his son Freyr, and presumably his daughter, Freyja, came to dwell among the Aesir and to be accepted in their hierarchy.

Odin (Óðinn)

According to literary sources, Odin was the foremost of the Aesir, but the limited occurrence of his name in place-names seems to indicate that his worship was not widespread. He appears, however, to have been the god of kings and nobility more than the deity to whom the common man would turn for support. His name defines him as the god of inspired mental activity and strong emotional stress, as it is related to Icelandic *óðr*, which applies to the movements of the mind, and to German *Wut*, meaning “rage” or “fury.” This qualifies him as the god of poetic inspiration and the stories about the origin of poetry narrate how Odin brought the sacred mead of poetry to the world of the gods. This beverage was first brewed from the blood of a wise god, Kvasir, who was murdered by dwarfs. It later came into the hands of a giant and was stolen by Odin, who flew from the giant’s stronghold in the shape of an eagle, carrying the sacred mead in his crop to regurgitate it in the dwelling of the gods. Therefore, the early skalds designate poetry as “Kvasir’s blood” or “Odin’s theft.”

There is also a darker side to Odin’s personality: he incites kinsmen to fight and turns against his own favourites, because he needs heroes in the otherworld to join him in the final battle against the forces of destruction at the time of Ragnarök. Therefore, the fallen warriors on the battlefield are said to go to his castle Valhalla (Valhöll), the “Hall of the Slain,” where they live in bliss, training for the ultimate combat. He is also a necromancer and a powerful magician who can make hanged men talk. He is the god of the hanged, because he hanged himself on the cosmic tree Yggdrasill to acquire his occult wisdom. As the “Hávamál” tells us, he hung there for nine nights, pierced with a spear, sacrificed to himself, nearly dead, to gain the mastery of the runes and the knowledge of the magic spells that blunt a foe’s weapons or free a friend from fetters.

Odin could change his shape at will, and, with his body in cataleptic sleep, he traveled to other worlds, like a shaman. As god of the dead, he was accompanied by carrion beasts, two wolves and two ravens. These birds kept him informed of what happened in the world, adding to the knowledge he had acquired by relinquishing his one eye in the well of Mímir under the tree Yggdrasill.

Untrustworthy, Odin may break the most sacred oath on the holy ring. As “spear-thruster,” he opens the hostilities, and in the bellicose period of the Viking expeditions his cult appeared to gain momentum. Odin, like Wôden or Wotan, is, however, essentially the sovereign god, whom the Germanic dynasties, in England as well as in Scandinavia, originally regarded as their divine founder. He thus maintains the prominent position of Wōðan[az] in classical antiquity, to whom, according

to Tacitus, human sacrifice was offered. Latin writers identified Wōðan[az] with Mercury, as the name of the day, Wednesday, (i.e., "day of Wôden"), for *Mercurii dies* (French *mercredi*), indicates. It is possible that the tribal god of the Semnones, described by Tacitus as *regnator omnium deus* ("the god governing all"), could be identified with Wōðan[az]. They would indeed sacrifice a man to him in a sacred grove in what the ancient author describes as a "horrendous ritual."

Thor (þórr)

Thor is a god of very different stamp. Place-names, personal names, poetry, and prose show that he was worshiped widely, especially toward the end of the pagan period. Thor is described as Odin's son, but his name derives from the Germanic term for "thunder." Like Indra and other Indo-European thunder-gods, he is essentially the champion of the gods, being constantly involved in struggles with the giants. His main weapon is a short-handled hammer, Mjölnir, with which he smashes the skull of his antagonists. One of his best-known adventures describes his pulling the cosmic serpent Jörmungand (Jörmungandr), which surrounds the world, out of the ocean. As he fails to kill the monster then, he will have to face it again in a combat to the finish in which they both die, in the Ragnarök.

Thor is the god of the common man. As place-names in eastern Scandinavia and in England indicate, peasants worshiped him because he brought the rains that ensured good crops. Warriors trusted him, and he seems to have been popular with them everywhere. He was well known as Thunor in the Saxon and Jutish areas in England; the Saxons on the mainland venerated him as Thunær. When the Vikings conquered Normandy and the Varangians settled in Russia, they called upon Thor to help them in their military enterprises.

On account of his association with thunder, the Germanic god *þunraz* (Thor) was equated with Jupiter by the Romans; hence, the name of the day, Thursday (German *Donnerstag*), for *Jovis dies* (Italian *giovedi*). Thor traveled in a chariot drawn by goats, and later evidence suggested that thunder was thought of as the sound of his chariot.

Balder (Baldr)

The west Norse sources name another son of Odin, Balder, the immaculate, patient god. When Balder had dreams foreboding his death, his mother, Frigg, took oaths from all creatures, as well as from fire, water, metals, trees, stones, and illnesses, not to harm Balder. Only the mistletoe was thought too young and slender to take the oath. The guileful Loki tore up the mistletoe and, under his guidance, the blind god Höd (Höðr) hurled it as a shaft through Balder's body. The gods sent an emissary to Hel, goddess of death; she would release Balder if all things would weep for him. All did, except a giantess, who appears to be none other than Loki in disguise. There is another version of this story, to which allusion is made in a west Norse poem (*Baldrs draumar*). According to this Loki does not seem to be directly responsible for Balder's death but Höd alone. Balder's name occurs rarely in place-names, and it does not appear that his worship was widespread.

The Danish historian Saxo gives an entirely different picture of Balder: he is not the innocent figure of the west Norse sources but a vicious and lustful demigod. He and Höd were rivals for the hand of Nanna, said in west Norse sources to be Balder's wife. After many adventures, Höd pierced Balder with a sword. In order to secure vengeance, Odin raped a princess, Rinda (Rindr), who bore a son, Bous, who killed Höd.

Saxo's story has many details in common with the west Norse sources, but his views of Balder were so different that he may have been following a Danish rather than a west Norse tradition. Much of Saxo's story is placed in Denmark.

There has been much dispute among scholars about the symbolic significance of Balder's myth. He has been described as a dying spring god; some have stressed his Christ-like features in the west Norse version. The major protagonists in the drama have warrior names, and the game in which the gods hurl missiles at the almost invulnerable Balder is reminiscent of an initiatory test.

Loki

There is no more baffling figure in Norse mythology than Loki. He is counted among the Aesir but is not one of them. His father was a giant (Fárbauti; "Dangerous Striker"). Loki begat a female, Angrboda (Angrboða; "Boder of Sorrow"), and produced three evil progeny—the goddess of death, Hel, the monstrous serpent surrounding the world, Jörmungand, and the wolf Fenrir (Fenrisúlfr), who lies chained until he will break loose in the Ragnarök. Loki himself lies bound but will break his bonds in the Ragnarök to join the giants in battle against the gods.

Loki deceived the gods and cheated them, but sometimes he got them out of trouble. He is seen in company with Odin and an obscure god Hœnir, and he is called the friend of Thor. He is essentially a "trickster" figure who can change sex and shape at will. Thus, he can give birth as well as beget offspring. The eight-legged horse of Odin, Sleipnir, was born of Loki in the shape of a mare. According to an Eddic lay, Loki ate the heart of an evil woman and grew pregnant. He fights with Heimdall in the shape of a seal for the possession of the Brísingamen necklace, and later, he sneaks into Freyja's residence in the form of a fly to steal the same precious object for Odin. According to an early poem, Odin and Loki had mixed their blood as foster brothers. It has been suggested that Loki was a hypostasis of Odin, or at least that he represents Odin's darkest side. He seems to symbolize "impulsive intelligence," together with an irrepressible urge to act and an unpredictable maliciousness.