

# Norse Gods & Myths

*An overview – with the duality of the gods*

An overview of the most important figures of Norse mythology – with what defines them. Striking is their **duality**: hardly any god is only light or only dark. It is precisely this tension that makes the Norse world of gods so alive. (Retold after the Poetic and Prose Edda, public domain; original text.)

## How many gods were there?

Tradition knows no fixed number – the Norse pantheon was never a closed system. In the *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson lists twelve Æsir besides Odin and then names sixteen goddesses – so even in his account there are almost thirty deities introduced by name. To these come the Vanir (the older family of gods around Njörd, Freyr and Freyja), powers of fate such as the Norns and Valkyries, deified beings of nature like Sol and Mani, and figures on the border between giants and gods such as Loki, Skadi and Ægir.

Counting all divine figures named in the Poetic and Prose Edda, one arrives at well over fifty. The twenty-six most important are presented here in detail – each with its own duality.

## Odin

The all-father is god of wisdom, poetry, runes and ecstasy – and at the same time lord of war and death. No god has paid a higher price for knowledge: at Mímir's well he gave an eye for a single draught of wisdom, and to win the runes he hung for nine nights, pierced by his own spear, on the world tree Yggdrasil – "given to Odin, myself to myself", as the *Hávamál* says. He also stole the mead of poetry in eagle's shape from the mountain of the giant Suttung and brought it to the gods and to poets.

From his high seat Hlidskjalf he surveys all the worlds. The ravens Huginn and Muninn ("thought" and "memory") fly out daily and whisper to him what is happening; at his feet lie the wolves Geri and Freki, to whom he gives all his food – he himself lives on wine alone. He rides the eight-legged steed Sleipnir, bears the spear Gungnir and the ring Draupnir. As father of the slain he has the Valkyries lead half of the fallen to Valhalla, where the Einherjar train for the last battle. With more than 170 recorded by-names – Wanderer, Grímnir, High One, Father of Victory – he is the most many-faced of all gods; his name lives on in the English Wednesday (Woden's day). At Ragnarök the wolf Fenrir devours him – yet, knowing this, he still rides at the front.

*Duality: Wisdom and madness in one figure: he grants poetry and insight, yet also stirs war and discord. He is faithful and deceitful at once – a god who gives and takes.*

## Frigg

The highest of the goddesses, Odin's wife, is goddess of marriage, motherhood, the home – and of fate. She sits in her hall Fensalir ("marsh halls") and knows the destinies of all beings, yet she never speaks them. She alone is permitted by Odin to sit beside him on the high seat Hlidskjalf. Around her gathers a court of goddesses of her own: Fulla carries her casket, Gná rides as her messenger through the worlds, Eir heals.

Her greatest story is her greatest defeat: when her son Baldr is plagued by dark dreams, she takes an oath from all things in the world not to harm him – fire and water, iron and stone, trees, beasts, diseases. Only the young mistletoe she passes over. Through exactly this gap Loki guides the deadly twig. Some scholars suspect that Frigg and Freyja were originally one and the same goddess – the Edda separates them clearly, yet the closeness remains. Her name, too, lives on in a weekday: in Friday.

*Duality: Omniscience and powerlessness: she knows every fate and yet cannot avert the death of her son Baldr. Knowledge that does not protect from sorrow.*

## Thor

The thunder god is the protector of gods and humans and the tireless foe of the giants. His weapons: the hammer Mjölfnir, which never misses its mark and returns by itself (its short handle is a forging flaw – Loki, in the shape of a fly, disturbed the dwarfs), the power-belt Megingjörð, which doubles his divine strength, and iron gauntlets. He drives across the sky in a chariot drawn by the goats Tanngrisnir and Tanngrjóstr, which he can slaughter in the evening and bring back to life with his hammer in the morning. In Bilskírnir, his hall of 540 gates, he lives with golden-haired Sif; his children are Magni ("strength"), Móði ("courage") and Thrúd ("power").

The Edda loves telling his adventures most of all: how he hooked the Midgard Serpent while fishing with the giant Hymir, how he retrieved his stolen hammer from Thrymheim disguised as a bride, how Útgarda-Loki fooled him with illusions – he lifted the World Serpent as a "cat" and drank from the sea itself. Among ordinary people Thor was the most beloved of all gods: more than a thousand hammer amulets survive, countless place and personal names carry his name, and Thursday belongs to him to this day. At Ragnarök he slays the Midgard Serpent – and falls after nine steps, felled by its venom.

*Duality: Raw and yet blessing: his thunder destroys and at the same time brings the fertile rain. He is the impetuous force that keeps chaos in check – a protector through sheer might.*

## Sif

Thor's wife is famous for her hair of pure gold – many interpreters see in it the ripe cornfield made to thrive by the thunder god's rain. Her great story begins with an outrage: Loki shears off her hair while she sleeps. Furious, Thor forces him to provide a replacement, and Loki has the dwarfs, the sons of Ívaldi, forge new hair of real gold that grows like living hair. From the same wager with the smiths also come Odin's spear Gungnir, the ship Skíðbladnir, the ring Draupnir, the boar Gullinbursti – and Mjölfnir itself.

Thus, at the origin of Thor's hammer stands, of all things, a cruel joke at Sif's expense. She is mother of the winter god Ullr (from an earlier union) and of strong Thrúd. In the Lokasenna she calmly pours the mocker Loki a cup of mead – an attempt to settle the quarrel where others rage.

*Duality: The quiet centre beside the loudest god: her stolen hair becomes the birth of Asgard's mightiest weapons. From insult comes blessing – a loss that makes the gods stronger.*

## Baldr

The shining god is the fairest, wisest and gentlest of the Æsir – "so bright that light shines from him", says Snorri. He dwells in Breidablik, the place where nothing impure may be. When dark dreams of his own death torment him, his mother Frigg takes an oath from all things not to harm him. From then on the gods amuse themselves by shooting at the invulnerable one – until Loki discovers the gap: the young mistletoe. He presses it into the hand of blind Hödr and guides his throw. Baldr falls dead – "the greatest misfortune that ever befell gods and men".

The Æsir burn him on his ship Hringhorni, which only the giantess Hyrrokkin can push into the water; his wife Nanna dies of grief and is burned with him, and Odin lays the ring Draupnir on the pyre. Hermod rides to Hel to ransom him – but the giantess Thökk (most likely Loki himself) alone refuses the redeeming tear. So Baldr remains with the dead until after Ragnarök: from the new, green world he returns, reconciled with Hödr – the hope of the Norse myths.

*Duality: Light and death: it is the purest who must die. In him lies the downfall – and at the same time the hope of return and renewal.*

## Hödr

The blind god is the most tragic figure of Asgard. Strong but sightless, he stands aside while the gods shoot at invulnerable Baldr for sport. Loki hands him the mistletoe and guides his hand – "I too would honour my brother" – and so it is the brother, of all people, who becomes Baldr's slayer, without intent, without guilt in his heart.

Vengeance nevertheless follows the old law: Odin's son Váli, begotten for this very purpose and only one night old, slays Hödr. Yet the Edda grants him mercy in the great scheme: after Ragnarök he returns from the realm of the dead at Baldr's side, and together they inhabit the halls of the new world – the slain and his slayer, reconciled.

*Duality: A perpetrator without guilt: his hand kills, but the will was Loki's. The instrument of disaster is itself redeemed in the end – guilt and reconciliation in one figure.*

## Freyja

Probably the most powerful goddess is mistress of love, beauty and fertility – and equally of death and magic. As one of the Vanir she came to the Æsir as a hostage after the war of the divine families, together with her father Njörd and her brother Freyr, and taught them seidr, the mighty art of magic that even Odin learned from her. On the battlefield she chooses first: half of the fallen go to her hall Sessrúmnir on the meadow Fólkvangr, and only the other half belong to Odin – so says the Grímnismál.

She drives a chariot drawn by two cats, rides the boar Hildisvíni and owns a falcon cloak with which she flies through the worlds. Her most famous treasure is the necklace Brísingamen, forged by four dwarfs. Weeping, she searches all worlds for her vanished husband Óð – her tears turn to red gold, and in the sea to amber. Her daughters are called Hnoss and Gersemi, both words for "jewel". Giants desire her incessantly – to the Vikings she was longing, power and consolation at once: goddess of love, teacher of magic and mistress of half of all heroes.

*Duality: Love and death in one hand: she awakens desire and receives the battle-dead. Beauty and battlefield, fullness of life and transience belong inseparably together in her.*

## Freyr

The Vanir god is lord of good weather, harvest, peace and prosperity – "ár ok fridr", good harvest and peace, was the formula of his cult. As a teething gift he received the realm of the light elves. The dwarfs forged for him the golden-bristled boar Gullinbursti, which runs faster than any horse and glows in the dark, and the wonder-ship Skíðbladnir, which always has a fair wind and can be folded up like a cloth. His great sanctuary stood at Uppsala; the Swedish Yngling kings traced their line back to him.

His most famous story is told in the Skírnismál: from the high seat Hlidskjalf he beholds the giant's daughter Gerd, whose arms light up air and sea, and falls sick with love. His servant Skírnir woos her on his behalf – and receives as reward Freyr's sword, which fights by itself. The god of peace pays this price to the end: at Ragnarök he faces the fire giant Surtr without his weapon and falls among the first. Whoever loves peace gives the sword out of his hand – the Edda knows what that costs.

*Duality: Peace at the price of defencelessness: the god of plenty gives up his weapon for love – and therefore falls defenceless at Ragnarök. Fertility and sacrifice, peace and vulnerability.*

## Njörd

The Vanir god of the sea, the wind, seafaring and wealth lives in Nóatún, the "ship enclosure" by the coast. He calms storm and fire, blesses fishing and trade – whoever in the North was called "rich as Njörd" had made it. With his children Freyr and Freyja he came to the Æsir as a hostage after the Vanir war; Tacitus already describes, in the goddess Nerthus, an old continental relative of his name.

His marriage to the mountain giantess Skadi became the proverbial image of irreconcilable worlds: for nine nights at a time they would live alternately in the mountains and by the sea. But Njörd could not bear the howling of the

wolves, which "seemed ugly to him compared with the song of the swans", and Skadi found no sleep amid the screeching of the gulls. They parted on good terms – the sea cannot be carried into the mountains.

*Duality: Sea and mountain that do not get along: wealth and longing, closeness and strangeness – a union of opposites that finds no home.*

## Skadi

The giant's daughter came to Asgard in full armour to avenge the death of her father Thjazi – alone against all the gods. The Æsir offered atonement: she was allowed to choose a husband, but only by the feet. She chose the most beautiful – and received not Baldr but the sea god Njörd. Part of the settlement was that the gods had to make her laugh: only when Loki staged a grotesque tug-of-war with a billy goat did she laugh. Odin threw her father's eyes into the sky as stars.

As goddess of winter, the hunt and snowshoeing – the skalds call her Öndurdís, "snowshoe goddess" – she stayed true to the mountains; her marriage to the coastal god failed because of it. Her hardness remains: at Loki's punishment it is she who fastens the venom-dripping serpent above his face. Her name lives on in many Norwegian and Swedish place names – some scholars even connect it with Scandinavia itself.

*Duality: Giantess and goddess, vengeance and reconciliation: she comes as an enemy and becomes part of the world of the gods. Cold and the hunt, hardness and a new bond.*

## Tyr

The old god of law, the oath and war was once perhaps the highest sky god of the Germanic peoples: his name (Proto-Germanic \*Tiwaz) is linguistically the same as Zeus and Jupiter, and the Romans equated him with Mars – which is why Tuesday in English is Tiu's day. In the North he stepped back behind Odin and Thor, but remained the god in whom oaths and Thing assemblies had their sanctity: the god of the binding word.

His great deed is a legal act in its purest form. When the gods want to bind the uncannily growing wolf Fenrir with the magic fetter Gleipnir, the beast scents betrayal and demands a pledge: a god's hand must lie in its jaws. Only Tyr places his there – knowing that the fetter will hold and the wolf will bite. The gods win their safety, Tyr loses his oath-hand. At Ragnarök he fights the hell-hound Garm; they kill each other. The Tiwaz rune bears his name to this day.

*Duality: Justice that costs something: law and war, courage and loss. Order is not given but bought with a sacrifice.*

## Heimdall

The most watchful god guards the rainbow bridge Bifröst and dwells there in Himinbjörg, the "sky fortress". His senses are without equal: he needs less sleep than a bird, sees a hundred leagues by night as by day, and hears the grass growing on the earth and the wool on the sheep. He was born at the edge of the world – of nine mothers at once, nine giant sisters whom many take to be the wave-daughters of the sea. His teeth are of gold, his horse is called Gulltopp.

As Ríg ("king") he wandered the earth and fathered, in three houses, the ancestors of the social orders – thrall, farmer and jarl: thus the Rígsthula makes him forefather of the human order. With Loki, his adversary, he wrestled in seal form for Freyja's Brísingamen. His horn Gjallarhorn lies ready beneath the world tree: when he blows it, it is heard in all the worlds – it is the signal for Ragnarök. In the last battle he and Loki kill each other: the watchman falls last, and with him the watch ends.

*Duality: Guardian and herald of doom: forever he watches over the world – and yet it is he who, with his horn, heralds the end, Ragnarök. Preserver and harbinger at once.*

## Loki

The cunning shape-shifter is the son of the giant Fárbaúti and of Laufey – and yet Odin's blood-brother, living among the Æsir. Fair of form, evil of mind, "smith of all lies" and at the same time the rescuer in countless troubles: he procures the gods their greatest treasures (Mjölfnir, Gungnir, Skíðbladnir – all fruits of his wager with the dwarfs), brings Idun and her apples back, and as a mare prevents the giant master-builder from claiming his wage – from this transformation comes Odin's eight-legged steed Sleipnir: Loki is its mother.

With the giantess Angrboda he fathers the three fated enemies of the gods: the wolf Fenrir, the Midgard Serpent and Hel. His deeds grow darker: he shears Sif's hair, mocks all the gods at the feast in the Lokasenna – and finally guides the mistletoe that kills Baldr. There the patience of the Æsir ends: caught as a salmon, he is bound to three stones with the entrails of his own son; Skadi hangs a venom-dripping serpent above him. His faithful wife Sigyn catches the venom in a bowl – but when she empties it, he convulses, and the earth quakes. At Ragnarök he breaks free and steers the ship of the dead, Naglfar, against the gods.

*Duality: Helper and destroyer in one person: in him order and chaos are inseparable. He brings forth life (Odin's steed Sleipnir) and death (Baldr's end) – the necessary counterplay of the world of the gods.*

## Hel

The daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda rules over the realm of the dead that bears her name, deep down in Niflheim. Odin himself cast her there when the gods learned what doom threatened from Loki's children – and gave her power over all who die of sickness and old age. Whoever does not fall in battle goes "hel-wards". Her appearance is her realm: half of healthy colour, half blue-black like a corpse – easy to recognise, hard to forget.

Snorri describes her court with sombre names: her hall is called Éljúdnir ("rain-wet"), her dish Hunger, her knife Famine, her threshold Stumbling-block, her bed Sickbed. Yet Hel is no devil: her realm is not a place of punishment but the silent, inescapable home of most of the dead. When Hermod negotiates for Baldr, she even shows herself willing – let all the world weep, and she will release him. It fails not because of her, but because of a single refused tear.

*Duality: Half living, half dead: hostess and jailer at once. Her silent realm is neither punishment nor paradise – only the inescapable other.*

## Idun

The goddess of youth keeps, in a casket of ash wood, the apples the gods eat when age touches them – her most precious dowry, for the Æsir are not immortal by themselves. She is the wife of the poet-god Bragi: youth and poetry live in one house.

Her great story is her abduction: the giant Thjazi forces Loki, caught in his eagle's claws, to deliver Idun to him. Loki lures her out of Asgard with a tale of "better apples" – and the giant carries her off in eagle's shape. At once the gods grow grey and old. Under threat of death Loki must bring her back: in Freyja's falcon cloak he turns Idun into a nut and flies home with her, while the Æsir pile wood shavings on the wall – the pursuing eagle Thjazi burns in the flames that leap up. From his eyes Odin makes stars, and his daughter Skadi comes to Asgard for atonement: one story draws the next one after it.

*Duality: Fragile and indispensable: the immortality of all hangs on a single goddess. Youth and transience lie an arm's length apart in her.*

## Bragi

The god of poetry and eloquence is Valhalla's house poet: with long beard and harp he welcomes the fallen kings as they enter Odin's hall – so the old praise-songs for Erik Bloodaxe and Hakon the Good describe it. He is "famed for wisdom and skill of tongue"; after him the art of poetry itself is called "bragr". Legend says runes are carved on his tongue. His wife is Idun – the poet and youth.

At funeral feasts the "bragafull", Bragi's cup, was drained: on it solemn vows for the coming year were sworn. Behind this probably lies a piece of history: the oldest skald known by name, Bragi Boddason the Old (9th century), became so famous that posterity may have raised the poet among the gods. In the Lokasenna he must endure Loki calling him "bench-ornament" – the mocker accuses the poet of cowardice, but Bragi's weapon was never the sword: it was the word.

*Duality: Word instead of weapon: the only god whose entire power is language. Loki calls him a coward – yet what remains of heroes is created by the poet alone: lasting fame.*

## Ullr

The god of winter, archery and snowshoeing dwells in Ýdalir, the "yew dales" – the best bows were made of yew wood. Snorri calls him fair of face, skilled in war and unmatched on snowshoes; he was invoked before single combat. He is Sif's son and thus Thor's stepson. One verse records that oaths were sworn on "Ullr's ring" – a sanctuary at Lilla Ullevi in Sweden, strewn with amulet rings, seems to confirm exactly that.

The many places bearing his name – Ullevi, Ullern, Ulleråker across Sweden and Norway – reveal that Ullr was once a great god, perhaps among the highest, whose stories were lost before the Edda could write them down. In Saxo Grammaticus, "Ollerus" even rules for a time in Odin's place. What remains is the silhouette of a mighty winter god on skis, bow in hand.

*Duality: Great in cult, small in story: once perhaps a high god, almost nothing remains of him but place names and an oath-ring. Fame fades – traces remain.*

## Forseti

The son of Baldr and Nanna is the god of legal peace and the best judge among gods and humans. His hall Glitnir ("the shining one") rests on pillars of red gold and is roofed with silver – the court as the brightest place in the world. Whoever comes to him with a dispute leaves reconciled: "all who come to him with hard cases go away united", says the Grímnismál.

While Tyr stands for the hard law of the sword and the Thing, Forseti embodies the other side of justice: the settlement that lets both sides stand. A Frisian legend knows a god "Fosite" with a holy island (Heligoland has been interpreted as such) – possibly an echo of the same god of law on the North Sea coast. From the son of the gentlest god comes the gentlest office: peace after the quarrel.

*Duality: Judgement without losers: where Tyr buys law with sacrifice, Forseti mediates until both sides can walk away. Severity and mildness – two faces of the same justice.*

## Vidar

The "silent As" is Odin's son with the giantess Gríð and, after Thor, the strongest of the gods. He dwells in Vidi, a land of tall grass and young woods – silence is his realm. His attribute is the strangest in the Edda: an enormous shoe, made up of all the scraps of leather that shoemakers have cut off and thrown away since the beginning of time. Whoever wished to help the gods, it was said, should not carelessly discard their leather offcuts.

For this shoe has a destiny: when at Ragnarök the wolf Fenrir has devoured Odin, Vidar steps forward, braces his shod foot against the wolf's lower jaw, seizes the upper jaw – and tears the maw apart. Thus the silent one avenges his father. Vidar is among the few who survive the world's end: with Váli, Móði, Magni, Baldr and Hödr he sits on

the meadows of the new world, where Asgard once stood.

*Duality: Silence before the one moment: a god who is quiet and waits – his whole existence aims at a single deed. Patience as the greatest strength.*

## Vali

The youngest of the Æsir was born for a single task: to avenge Baldr's death. Odin fathered him with Rind, the daughter of a prince in the east – the seeress of the Völuspá had foretold it. Only one night old, Váli went into battle: unwashed and uncombed, as the poem says, he did not rest until he had brought Hödr, the unwilling slayer, to the pyre.

Disturbing as the figure seems, it embodies the iron duty of vengeance of the old world: an unavenged dead man gave his kin no peace. Yet Váli too is among the survivors of Ragnarök; in the new world he sits peacefully beside Baldr and Hödr – the avenger beside the avenged and the punished. Vengeance has done its duty; what remains is reconciliation.

*Duality: Born to punish: a child as executor of fate. He embodies the harshness of the duty of revenge – and outlives it into a world that no longer needs it.*

## Hermod

The "bold" son of Odin is the messenger of the gods – and the hero of the saddest journey in the Edda. When Baldr is dead and all Asgard falls silent, Frigg asks who, for her son's sake, will ride the road to Hel. Hermod volunteers. On Sleipnir, his father's steed, he rides nine nights through dark, deep valleys in which he sees nothing, crosses the gold-roofed bridge over the river of the dead, Gjöll – where the warden Móðgud marvels that one living man thunders louder than five troops of the dead – and finally leaps over Hel's gate.

In the hall of the dead Baldr sits in the seat of honour. Hel sets her condition: if all the world weeps for him, she will release him. Hermod rides home with hope and with Baldr's ring Draupnir – but one single being does not weep. His journey fails, and yet remains one of the greatest deeds: to ride down into the dark, not to fight, but to ask for a brother back.

*Duality: Courage without a sword: his heroic deed is an errand into the realm of the dead. He brings not victory but a plea – and fails honourably by a single tear.*

## Mimir

The wisest of all beings guards the well beneath the root of Yggdrasil that leads to the frost giants: in its water wisdom and understanding lie hidden. Every morning Mimir himself drinks from it – out of the Gjallarhorn. Whoever else wishes to drink must pay: Odin left his eye in the well as a pledge. Since then the all-father sees with one eye less – and infinitely more.

After the war of the divine families, Mimir was sent with Hönir as a hostage to the Vanir. When the Vanir noticed that handsome Hönir was helpless without Mimir's counsel, they beheaded the wise one and sent the head to Odin. The all-father embalmed it with herbs and sang spells over it – and the head has spoken with him ever since, "telling him many tidings from other worlds". Even on the eve of Ragnarök, Odin rides to the well and asks Mimir's head for counsel. Wisdom outlives the body – that is Mimir's whole story.

*Duality: Wisdom without power: he possesses all the knowledge of the worlds and yet cannot prevent his own end. Even as a dead man he remains counsellor to the highest god.*

## Ægir & Ran

In the North the sea has two faces – and two figures. Ægir, the sea giant, is the host of the gods: in his hall on the seabed gold shines instead of fire, and his ale brews in a cauldron that Thor fetched specially from the giant Hymir. All the Æsir come to his feast – it is there, too, that Loki's great tirade, the Lokasenna, takes place. The skalds therefore call gold "Ægir's fire".

His wife Ran is the dark side of the same sea: with her net she fishes the drowning from their ships down into the deep. Sailors carried gold on them to be well received by her – whoever appeared as a ghost at his own funeral feast was said to have been welcomed kindly by Ran. Her nine daughters are the waves, with names like Himinglæva ("the sky-mirroring") and Kólga ("the cool one") – the same nine sisters many take to be Heimdall's mothers. Banquet and grave: the sea gives both.

*Duality: Host and grave: the same sea that feasts the gods drags the sailors down. Ægir's golden hall and Ran's net – blessing and death from one deep.*

## Sol & Mani

Sun and moon are siblings in the North: children of a man so presumptuous that he named them Sól and Máni – after the lights the gods had made from the sparks of Muspelheim. As punishment the gods set the children in the sky: Sól has driven the sun chariot ever since, with the horses Árvak and Alsvid ("early-waker" and "all-swift"), cooling bellows lying under their harness; Máni guides the moon and governs its waxing and waning. Thousands of years earlier, the Trundholm sun chariot already shows the same idea: the sun, drawn by a horse.

Their journey is a flight: behind Sól races the wolf Sköll, behind Máni the wolf Hati – that is why sun and moon are in such haste. At Ragnarök the wolves catch and devour them both; at a solar eclipse, people believed, the wolf was already snapping. But the Edda does not end in darkness: Sól has first borne a daughter, more beautiful than herself, who after the world's end drives her mother's course – a new light over the new world.

*Duality: Light in flight: every day is a race against the wolf, every sunset a near-ending – and yet from the downfall a new light emerges.*

## The Norns

Three women of fate dwell at the Well of Urd beneath the world tree: Urd ("what has become"), Verdandi ("what is becoming") and Skuld ("what shall be") – past, present and future as three figures. Daily they draw water from the well and pour it over Yggdrasil's roots so that the tree does not wither; the water is so holy that everything it touches turns white. And they "carve into wood" and weave the threads of fate – including those of the gods: even Odin cannot turn their decree.

Besides the three great ones, the North knows many norns: at every birth they step up to the child and pronounce its lot – good norns grant a good life, but the unlucky complain of "uneven norns". The tale of Norna-Gest tells how an offended norn allotted a child only the life of a candle. In the belief in inescapable fate – *wyrd* – is rooted the famous equanimity of the North: what is ordained will come; all that matters is HOW one meets it.

*Duality: They nourish and they bind: the same hands that keep the tree alive weave everyone's end. Becoming and passing away from a single source.*

## The Valkyries

The "choosers of the slain" (Old Norse *valkyrjur*) are Odin's messengers on the battlefield: they determine who falls and who wins, and lead the chosen heroes to Valhalla, where they pour them mead. Their names speak for themselves – Hildr ("battle"), Gunnr ("war"), Skölgul, Göndul, Sigrdrífa ("driver of victory"). The eerie weaving song *Darradarljód* shows them at a loom of spears and entrails, weaving the outcome of a battle.

Yet the poems also know their other face: Valkyries like Brynhild or Sigrún love mortal heroes, defy Odin's command for it and pay the price – Brynhild is pricked with the sleep-thorn and banished within the wall of flame until Sigurd rides through it. In the burial-mound song Sigrún embraces her dead Helgi one last time: the death-angels of the North are at the same time its greatest lovers. Finds like the small silver Valkyrie figurine from Hårby show how present they were to people.

*Duality: Messenger of death and beloved: the same women who deal the heroes death pour them mead, love and immortality in song. Terror and tenderness in one figure.*

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