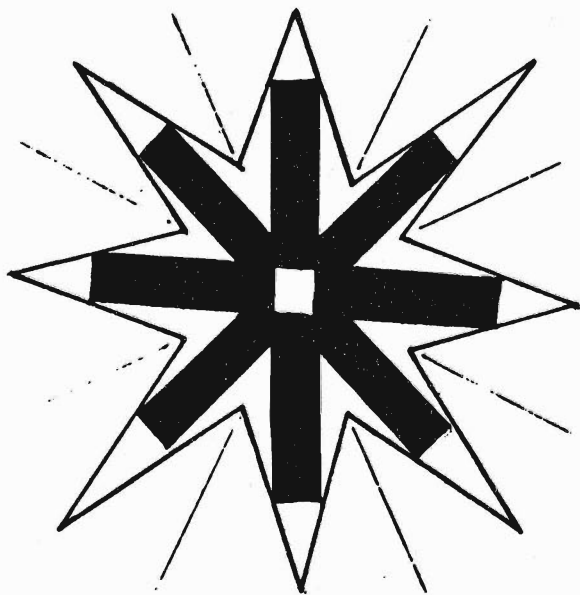
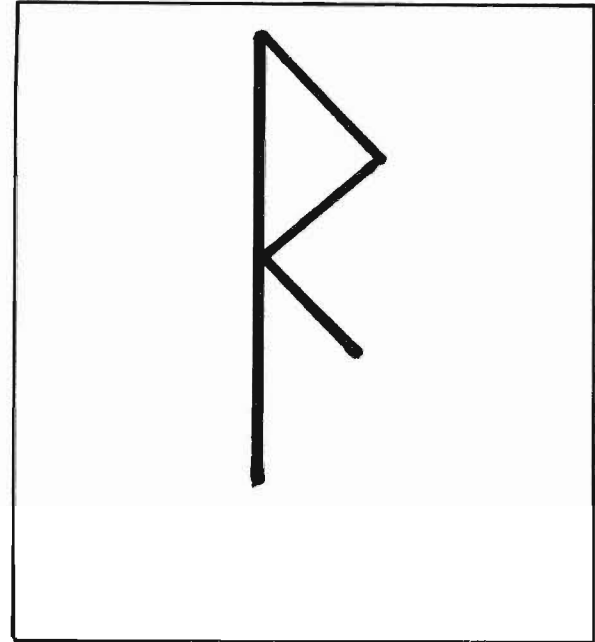


**THE
LESSONS
OF
ASGARD**



THE LESSONS OF ASGARD



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PREFACE

This collection of essays appeared over a span of almost two years in "The Runestone". Dealing as it does with the lessons to be learned from the Norse gods, it is a companion volume to The Values of Asatru. Together these booklets provide a good introduction to those who want to know how to lead their lives according to the principles of our ancient faith.

In our little homilies we have tried to examine the gods as they affect our conduct in the real world. We have avoided the deeper symbolic implications of our deities, preferring to deal with them as models showing us how to live. It is perhaps too easy to say that Odin exhorts us to learning and Thor urges us to strength, so we have tried to see one step beyond that level, studying in greater detail the implications of the gods' values and specifically how we can apply them to our lives.

Odin, Thor, Freya and all the others are examples for us to emulate as we deal with our own personal circumstances. As we have said, they are models. Appreciating them on this level is important to those who follow Asatru, but it is only part of their significance. Beyond the role model is a numinous, logic-defying reality, something apprehended only by means of symbols, something that speaks to us on deeper levels where words are inadequate and linear reasoning breaks down. Studying the gods, immersing ourselves in their lore, can gradually put us in touch with those realms of spirit and we can all add richness and power to our religious lives by tapping this ancient, non-verbal wisdom.

But - one step at a time. Let each of us try to live the lessons of the gods in our lives. In doing this we can eventually tune in to the deeper realities - and in the process, transform ourselves and the society in which we live.

Stephen A. McNallen
Breckenridge, Texas

ODIN

The gods and goddesses of Asatru are many things to us - forces in the universe, symbols in the unconscious mind, friends, and role models. It is in this last way, as examples of virtue to be imitated, that we will consider here. More particularly, we will look closely at the god Odin and see what lessons we are to learn from him, and how to apply these to daily life.

Odin is the god noted for his relentless pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. His quest for the mead of inspiration and his self-sacrifice to win the secrets of the runes tell of this. So also does the story where he plucked out an eye as the price for drinking at the well of wisdom, and often the Eddas describe necromantic or shamanic exploits where Odin wrests hidden knowledge from those who have it. But obviously we cannot literally re-enact these myths, so what shall we do?

We can educate ourselves, academically and otherwise, and we can pay the fee at the well of wisdom by saving to give our children the best education. Do you take an active interest in your children's schooling? Is your own mind sharp, or have you grown a bit soft around the synapses?

We can listen to our interior voices by paying attention to our dreams and scrying their meaning. By meditation we can tap some of the wisdom which lies within, and, by studying the runes which Odin won, we can in a sense recreate his quest and plumb more of the hidden aspects of the universe and of our own being.

To fully explore the virtues of Odin we should develop both the intuitive, creative part of our mind and the logical, fact-oriented portion. The two should work together in a well-integrated way so that we may apply all our talents as human beings to our willed ends. Most of us lean toward one side or the other, and so work and discipline will likely be necessary. The poet may have to struggle with mathematics to become an intellectually whole person, and the statistician may find it necessary to learn a musical instrument. But both may find a new sense of fulfillment and accomplishment they never dreamed existed.

Perhaps you will feel inspired to take a blank piece of paper and devote a few minutes to listing the ways you could better realize the lessons of Odin in your life. Include your own self-improvement,

as well as things you could do that would involve others like your family. Plan it out. What things should you study? Can you work on both the creative and the logical aspects of your own personality, so as to be a balanced individual? What about your children - will you start a college fund for them - meet with their teachers - join the PTA - teach them to meditate? Brainstorm a creative, lengthy list in a fairly uncritical way.

Now go back and pick out a few things you can do - not too much at first. Break them down into steps if necessary, to make them realistic. By what date do you want to accomplish each step?

When you've done this planning, you're ready to start! Go to it - remember to be persistent and to follow through; a plan MUST be executed or it's just a worthless piece of paper.

Odin loves most dearly those who reach beyond what they have and what they are. His heroes are the achievers, the doers, the dynamic unsatisfied ones who want more and more out of life. By training ourselves to seek knowledge and wisdom, we can grow closer to him. At the same time we live fuller, more active and more accomplished lives.



THOR

Thor blasts forth from the old myths and assaults our senses with images of a robust, powerful, dramatic figure - a god who befriends humans and who makes a mighty ally in life's battles. What can we learn from this figure? How can we grow in the virtues of Thor?

Let's first take another look at this character. He is incredibly strong, of course - and his anger makes his foe quake with fear. While Odin handles the rarefied realms of philosophy and mysticism, Thor is quite content to rely more on muscle, might, and main. Courageously, he battles the enemies of the gods and of humankind in protection of cosmic order. His lusty appetites match the rest of his attributes. Is there a single one of us who has not at least once wished for these strong, uninhibited traits? Let us look, then, at some ways we can be a bit more like this Asgardian big brother.

Upon examination, we see that all Thor's characteristics boil down to one thing - decisive ACTION taken in defense of right! Point by point, this god can teach us to overcome the obstacles that keep us from living full and significant lives. Let's look at some of these typical stumbling blocks, and see how Thor's spiritual weapons can smash them:

WEAKNESS/LETHARGY. This is no place to preach the need for bodily fitness; that is a "given". Suffice to say that we are not just talking about muscular strength, but also the vigor that overcomes inertia. This energetic approach to life involves diet, sleep, attitude, and many other factors in addition to the obvious need for exercise. Live properly and you will overcome weakness. In doing so, you are following Thor's example and preparing to defeat the next obstacle, which is

FEAR. Physical well-being and strength can help us overcome fear by making us more confident, but that is hardly the whole picture. Thor's courage can inspire us to face the things in our lives that intimidate us. We may not have to tussle with the Midgard Serpent, but we all wrestle with our own adversaries, whether physical or spiritual. The Hammer Wielder, when faced with an enemy, handled it in a predictable manner: He perceived the problem and determined to do something about it. He took aim with his marvelous hammer, then he flung it forth to smash the foe. We can vanquish fear in the same three-step process. First, we acknowledge our fear rather than

hiding it from ourselves, and resolve that we are not satisfied with that fear hanging over our lives. Then we "take aim" by devising a strategy or a systematic approach to beating that fear. We study it, analyze it, find the weak points that make it vulnerable. Finally, we throw the hammer of our will and take action until we are victorious.

DENIAL OF OUR INSTINCTS. Thor always permitted himself to be angry. This rage is told in story and saga and his enemies knew and feared his wrath. Today, though, a certain kind of "spiritual" person would tell us that this emotion is bad - "a fault to be overcome. . . a denial of the love we should show every creature". To this, the Asatruarar say "Nonsense!". Our ancestors evolved over countless generations under conditions of extreme peril. Anger, and other instinctive emotions were an essential motivator for individual and group survival. If you think it is different today, read the newspapers or take a stroll through the inner cities. Rather than putting anger down, we should rejoice that the gods have given us this tool for our preservation, and rid ourselves of the socially conditioned guilt which sometimes accompanies it.

Similar statements could be made about other life-affirming instincts. In general, Thor reminds us of the honest expression of our emotions and of the deep forces which produce them. They are a valid part of our biological makeup and we have a right to them!

BLINDNESS TO DUTY. In our alienated, atomized society, the very word "duty" has fallen into disrepute. When the prevailing mores are those of materialism and personal aggrandizement without regard to kin or tribe, duty is meaningless. Not so with Asa-Thor, and not so for those of us who would serve our Folk! Our duty is essentially the same as his, to serve our gods and our own kind against those forces inimicable to our survival. We do this not by pulverizing giants with a flying hammer, but by more mundane means - developing our own potential, being loyal to kin, and working for the advancement of our people and our religion. Thor makes us mindful of our duty, and encourages us in its determined performance.

In summary, we can use Thor as a model to overcome obstacles that hold us back from energetic action. Weakness falls to strength, fear dissolves before courage, repression of healthy instincts is discarded for the forthright expression of our inner urgings. Our brother, Thor, can help us demolish roadblocks and clear the way for a more fulfilled and satisfied approach to life.



FREY

Frey is a highly sexual god, almost always pictured with an erect penis. Fair enough, for that member represents the god's best-known trait - but unfortunate too, because in our erotically charged society we tend to focus almost exclusively on the sexual, often to the neglect of other important aspects. In this article let's save the most obvious for last, and see what, apart from the purely sensual, we can learn from the God of the Vanir.

First, we should take note that Frey's erection is an encouragement - almost a command - to procreation. Our forefathers had little time for hedonism, for life was a bit too tough for immersion in the sensual. On the one hand, this meant that pleasure was to be savored when the opportunity arose, but never could it be forgotten that there was more important business at hand - group and individual survival. Today the enjoyments are more constant and the danger more veiled, but the threat to our people is quite real. The birthrate of people of Northern European descent is dismally low. In most countries we are failing to replace even those members of the Folk we lose through death. Frey, and the Vanir in general, are linked to the idea of the continuity of the clan. While it is unfashionable in the declining West to urge people to have babies, Frey tells us outright that we have a duty to continue the line. But this is no somber duty, for the rewards are genetic immortality and a degree of personal fulfillment that the "me generation" set will never know. The first lesson of Frey is that procreation is good for the individual and the Folk, regardless of media mouthings.

Another message for us from this robust deity concerns the ever-popular topic of guilt. We have been made to feel guilty for our wealth, for the great deeds of our ancestors, and of course for our sexuality. In some ways, the sexual guilt trip is the key to all the others, for it represents all the life-affirming urges: the will to life and to power, the urge to honest ambition and justified anger, and the instinctive life in general. Frey says, "No more misplaced guilt!" Some impulses should produce feelings of shame - but not these! Frey smashes this false morality with hardy vigor and urges us to do the same. This way we can shake off the subtle chains of control that paralyze us on so many fronts.

A study of Frey's nature reveals that his sensuality is complemented by the warrior traits. It is not enough to plant the seed; the seed must be stoutly defended in a harsh world. Too often, people tend

to be either "lovers" or "fighters". Frey unifies these into a virile whole and warns us against leaning excessively to one side or another. We must endeavor to develop all the aspects of our personality essential to the survival of the individual and the Folk. Be a well-rounded follower of Asatru, capable of loving and fighting!

Finally, Frey does stand for sexual pleasure. He reminds us that enjoyment for its own sake is good even as he affirms the role of responsibility, in this as in all other parts of our lives.

Let us praise Frey, then, and learn well the lessons he would teach us. Some of them are pleasurable, some are liberating, some are fraught with duty, but all of them can help us be whole, effective people.



FREYA

Freya, goddess of love and Lady of the Vanir, would instruct us in several lessons both obvious and subtle. The one most frequently stressed deals with her connection to the ideas of sexual pleasure and procreation, and not without some justification. Surely, she, most beautiful of the goddesses, tells us that sexuality is to be enjoyed as one of the sweetest of life's treasures, the physical raptures of love ranking in our lives as the stones of the Brising necklace do in the life story of Freya herself. Shaking off false guilt associated with these natural urges is important, for it lessens the oppressive power of those who control and manipulate us. But, on the other hand, might not Freya have more to teach us than this?

In our society, obsessed as it is with the titillation which makes so many pointless lives bearable, it is easy to overlook the other messages the goddess sends us - procreation, to choose one. Freya isn't just the personification of the ultimate orgasm; she is involved in childbirth and marriage and reinforces our instinctive feeling that these realms of human activity are good, special and desirable. Like her brother Frey, she is associated with the continuity of the clan from one generation to the next. On the one hand she leads the disir, which may be seen as the female ancestors in the family's line, and on the other, she is connected to the nornir who transmit to a person their "fate" as it has accumulated from the past (both personal and ancestral). This idea of trans-generational spiritual properties makes sense only if there is procreation to continue the clan line. True, this is not the ethic of the upwardly mobile corporate professional, who hasn't the time for superfluities like children - sorry about that; Freya insists that, in general, having babies is not only okay, it's recommended.

Lest we fall into the snare of thinking of the Lady of the Vanir in the somewhat predictable female roles of sex goddess or promoter of the perpetual pregnancy, we must remember her fiercer side. The anger she showed in her refusal to wed Thrym is only a pale indication of her warrior-maiden role. When we recall that she chooses half the battle-slain, when we reflect on her links to the valkyries, when we consider her many parallels with Odin, we are led to conclude that Freya's martial abilities must be formidable. Picture her as a statuesque blond beauty if you wish, but don't forget the .44 magnum strapped to her thigh. Her message is simple: women too, can be strong, assertive, and full of fight. Perhaps more to the point, she is an example of the balanced woman. As Frey tells men that they can be lovers AND

fighters, Freya says the same thing to women. Really, they both speak to us all, men and women alike - "Develop ALL your abilities, unrestrained by single-minded stereotypes. Be passionate in guiltless love and in fighting prowess. Pass the torch of life to strong children through acts of loving pleasure, and guard its flame with your strength."

Challenging words, but essential ones if we are to live life to its fullest, savoring its sweetness and carrying out our duties. Let Freya inspire us in our striving.!



TYR

Tyr figures prominently in only one of the myths, but that single story tells us all we need to know about his message for us.

Loki's offspring, the Fenris Wolf, had grown to monstrous size and threatened the peace and safety of the gods. It was time for him to be bound so that he could do no harm. Twice the gods tried to chain him and twice he broke free. The third time, they held him with magic rather than sheer force but they convinced him to try on the shackles only by having Tyr place his hand in Fenris' mouth as a pledge - a hostage hand that the wolf promptly snapped off when the bonds held him fast.

Tyr gave his hand so that a threat to the cosmic order could be restrained. Most obviously, the lesson of Tyr is one of self-sacrifice for the good of one's kin. This is a worthy point in itself, and if we learned no other, we would be well served. But what else is there to be gleaned?

Tyr was renowned among the Northern peoples as a god involved in a special way with the Thing, or assembly of the people. This tradition continues today in the Althing of the Asatru Free Assembly, where Tyr is honored in the opening ceremony. Why would such a high honor be regularly given to this deity rather than to, say, Odin or another of the gods? Simply because Tyr had dramatically demonstrated his devotion to the group as a whole, rather than to his own selfish needs. His firm dedication to all the Aesir makes him the logical choice for a patron when one is seeking solutions to benefit all the Folk, rather than than some small interest group. Tyr reminds us, by his self-sacrifice, just what our priorities should be.

Notice, though, that there are rewards for Tyr's sacrifice. First, the wolf was bound. His binding proved painful for Tyr, but Tyr benefitted from the fact that Fenris was bound just as did all the other gods. He lost his hand but kept his life. Second, Tyr won great honor from the deed. And here, perhaps, is an elaboration on the lesson of self-sacrifice - it can be a wise course to follow, one which serves the individual as he gives of himself even as it benefits the community to which he gives. In a healthy society based on the values on the Folk (as opposed to the anti-Folk, diseased society in which most of us live) it can hardly be otherwise!

Tyr's bravery is apparent from this mythological tale, and we can

readily see why the Prose Edda calls any extremely bold person "Tyr-valiant". That same source, though, calls the very wise individual "Tyr-Wise". A less obvious attribute, perhaps, until one reflects how often self-absorption and an undue interest in one's own needs (the "me generation" complex) inhibits wisdom by skewing our perceptions. In choosing to give his hand, Tyr demonstrated his lack of personal bias and won the right to be acclaimed as a god of justice and clear perception. From there, it is a short step to wisdom of a more general kind.

Tyr, then, tells us of the duty to sacrifice for our kin, even as he reminds us that there are rewards for that sacrifice. Moreover, he points the way to the clarity that can be had by those who make their own needs and desires correspond to the needs and desires of the family, tribe, or Folk. In learning these lessons, we serve both ourselves and our people.



FRIGGA

In the myths, not much is said about Frigga. As wife of Odin and queen of the gods, she remains in the background and only occasionally steps forward to wield authority or influence events. Yet, surely a goddess of such high status has much to teach us. What, then, do we know about her that would help us discern her lessons for our lives?

Frigga's reticence is evident from the myths. She knows many things - past, present and future - but she speaks seldom. Surely her royal mate shares mighty confidences with her, but she keeps them locked in her bosom. When Frigga breaks her silence or takes action in the stories handed down to us, it is usually to ward danger from kin or to give aid to those under her protection. Examples of those functions are, respectively, her attempt to spare her son Balder from harm and the occasion when she tricked Odin into naming the Langobards so that he would be obliged to give them victory. We also know from studying the myths that Odin's wife shares many of the functions of the goddess Freya. Thus, she is involved in fertility, childbirth, marriage, and family.

Precious little with which to work! But we do have more information on Frigga, not from what the myths have to say about her, but rather based on who she is, archetypally. Frigga is none other than our Mother Earth, consort of the Sky Father. Knowing this, we can assume she is concerned with nurturing, with the producing and sustaining of life, and with the welfare of the planetary biosphere.

Based on these facts and suppositions, what does Frigga say to us?

Well, she doesn't really say much - and this is her first lesson, to know much but say little. She knows that a person's (or goddess's) significance is not in proportion to the amount of talking he or she does. This wisdom is echoed in the Havamal where Odin reminds us that

No one knows less what a nitwit he is
Than the man who talks too much.

and

Wise is he not who is never silent,
Mouthing meaningless words.

When Frigga acts to save Balder or give victory to the tribe she favors, she is doing two things. First, she is fulfilling duty to kin or to others to whom she is obliged. We should do likewise both as a point of honor and for the very practical consideration that such actions make for strong bonds of family and tribe and produce stable relationships on a personal level - all of which comes under Frigga's domain. Second, her actions in these instances are protective and nurturing in a general way suitable for the Mother of the Gods. We too, should exhibit these traits to those to whom we are tied by blood and loyalty, both for the good of the Folk and for happiness and contentment in our personal lives.

The connection between Frigga and Freya reinforces this commitment to nurturance, and expands it to take in the sphere of fertility, childbearing (and raising) and marriage. Each of us has an obligation to continue the family line, even at great personal sacrifice. Once we have children, we are responsible for seeing that they are reared in an environment that will encourage them to grow strong, brave and aware. To do this, we must strengthen the institutions of marriage and the family - by giving young people realistic criteria for choosing mates. All of us have a supporting role to play in these societal functions; our duties lie around us waiting to be done.

Finally, if Frigga is Mother Earth, we have a religious duty to preserve the environment. Can we despoil Frigga by poisoning the water and air, or by eroding her topsoil into the oceans with poor farming practices, or covering the planet with parking lots and skyscrapers? One does not have to be anti-science or anti-technology to realize that these marvelous abilities of ours must be used with wisdom, love and foresight.

In summary, be like the Earth. Who has seen more transpire than the ancient hills? Yet they are silent in their wisdom. Be solid, anchored in bedrock. Nurture life, and give blessings to those who depend on you. These are the things we have to learn from Frigga, queen of Asgard!



BALDER

Of all the Northern deities, Balder may be the one most misunderstood by the average person. A casual reading of the myths, especially as they are found in children's literature, or an acquaintance with the Christian-influenced works of re-interpreters like Matthew Arnold, will render a picture of Balder as a peaceful, even pacifist god whose sole traits are goodness and fairness of complexion. This son of Odin becomes a sort of Nordic Jesus, somehow out of step with the rest of Northern myth and religion.

In short, Balder the Good has been reduced to Balder the Goody-Goody. He has become a hostage, not of Hel as in the Eddic story, but of the alien beliefs which have come to permeate what was once a Northern European worldview. It's time we freed him and demolished the dank prison that has kept his light from shining on us, his kin.

The Balder-as-wimp school has little evidence to support it. Snorri's account says only that he is softly-spoken and pure; one translation adds mercifulness as a trait. Snorri also tells us at length how white his complexion is, comparing it to the whitest of flowers. Some modern tale-spinners have construed this as indicating a pallid, "sensitive" delicacy, but this is a reflection of their own values, not of the Eddic intent. In fact, there is plenty to indicate that to our ancestors Balder was far from the Christ-like figure that is often drawn for us. The old skalds used "Balder" as a kenning, or poetic synonym, for "warrior" -- suitably, since the very name translates as "bold". Beyond that, the Prose Edda account of the god's death contains what some scholars see as a warrior initiation rite! Remember that Balder was struck down by a shaft thrown by his blind brother Hoder, whose name means approximately, battle or conflict. The warrior is killed by the blind forces of war - by "blind chance" as we would say today. Surely this is a paradigm of the warrior's fate, not part of a morality play pandering to alien religious values!

Everyone has heard of Snorri's well-known version of the Balder myth. Less well-known is a different account, told by the chronicler Saxo, who casts his vote solidly against the "Balder-was-a-pacifist" camp. He relates a story not of Balder the god, but of Balder, a warrior hero who is figuratively a son of the high god. While superficially very different, Saxo's and Snorri's accounts have strong structural similarities.

From all the preceding, what has Balder to teach us? Plainly, NOT

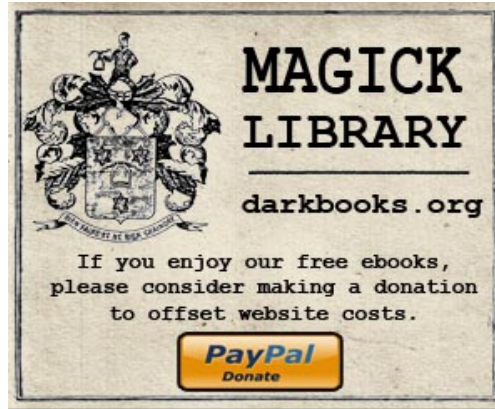
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the lesson of modern interpreters who see him as a sort of Christian forerunner, but rather the lesson of our own, unaltered lore: that one can combine gentleness of speech and demeanor with bold-heartedness and physical bravery, and Balder is the example for those who would do this. According to Magnus Magnusson,

"The Norse ideal was a man of open, generous disposition, a man imbued with qualities of compassion and kindness, not ruthless but firm and fair, even-tempered but capable of passion, physically accomplished and strong in a fight, but not a bully".

Certainly Balder is a reflection of this ethic. In thinking of him we remember that gentleness of speech is praised on memorial stones along with other virtues, and that this lack of bluster does not indicate any inherent non-violence. Balder teaches us the way of the noble warrior, a way characterized by self-control, magnanimity, and boldness.





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