

# ...and now, the top ten *thirteen* misconceptions about Loki.

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After a quarter of a century as a Lokean heathen, I've found that with most folks, my first conversation about the god Loki, as distinct from the comic book and movie character, consists largely of dispelling illusions. This is the case with heathens, enthusiasts of Norse culture, and even most other Lokeans. I easily understand why this happens, as I've read many of the popular books on Norse religion and mythology, which seem to rely on century-old scholarship, poetic rather than literal translations, and theories from earlier books that were presented as fact. What is harder to understand is why some heathens will defend ideas from such flimsy sources so passionately.

These concepts spread from books to the internet, where a few inaccurate sentences become the foundation of entire articles dismissive to the role of Loki in Norse mythology, or attempting to reduce him to a Nordic devil. These portrayals simply do not match the Loki described by the Old Norse and Icelandic sources from the heathen period and shortly afterwards.

Since I wrote the original "top ten" version of this article, Marvel has far surpassed Wagner and Guerber in any competition for creating misunderstandings of Norse myth. While their depictions of space gods can certainly be entertaining, the *Thor* comics and movies take proper names from Norse mythology and very little else. I needed to bump the number up to twelve misconceptions just to address the amusing family history they created, with Laufey as the biological father and Odin as the adoptive father of Loki. While I had been aware of that interpretation since reading the comics in the 1980s, I had not encountered anyone who had confused it with Norse myth prior to the Marvel movies. Then I decided to add a bonus point at the end, as there's a particular ridiculous argument I've seen a few times, that dearly needs to be put to rest.

I had written this article for a heathen audience, and upon coming back to it, I saw that clarification is needed for anyone reading without an understanding of Norse poetic devices, such as kennings and *heiti*. As I was writing for a print publication, I had to be more conservative with my words, and did not fully explain my scepticism with the reliability of Snorri Sturluson. This issue deserves more clarity, as I admire the immense gifts he left to us with the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, but that does not stop me from examining his versions of each myth with scholarly cynicism. I've also corrected or clarified a few basic mistakes I made, some I caught myself and others that were pointed out to me.

So, these are the thirteen most common misconceptions about Loki, all of which are about as reliable as the etymology that the *æsir* gods are called that "because they came from Asia"<sup>1</sup>:

## 1. Loki is a giant, who lives with the gods.

This statement is a standard for many introductory mythology books, and is not just inaccurate, it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the Norse gods. When a chapter on Loki starts with a line such as this, 'giant' is being translated for the Norse *jötun*, and 'gods' for the Norse *æsir* and *vanir*. Old Norse uses the words *gjør* and *gygr* for 'giant' and *goð* for 'god', but not in such a simplistic manner.

*Æsir* is a collective noun for gods, with the male *áss* and female *ásynja* corresponding to 'god' and 'goddess'. *Vanir* is another group of gods, with a male *van* being a 'god' and a presumed female construction of *vanja*, but in practice *vana dís* is used for a 'goddess'. *Jötnar* are a third group of gods, with scant evidence of worship, but respected as equally worthy of awe as the *æsir* and *vanir*<sup>2</sup>. The male form is *jötun*, with the female *jötynja* being unattested in writing. This does not seem to be as simple as three races of gods, as the mother of Óðin (Odin) comes from the *jötnar*, and Þór (Thor) is his son with Jörð, the Earth goddess who is also from the *jötnar*. If we use modern concepts of ancestry, Þór is three-quarters *jötun*, but that is never a concern, or even worthy of a jibe in *Lokasenna*, where anything even slightly unseemly can

be used as an insult. Unfortunately, in most works on Norse mythology, it is standard to translate *jötun* as ‘giant’ rather than the English cognate word ‘etin’ (still found in the better dictionaries).

My best understanding of why the *jötnar* are so frequently understood as ‘giants’ is from the popular myth of Útgarðaloki. In it, a deceitful etin whose name means ‘Loki of the Outlands’ presents himself and his company as giants of incredible size, and dupes Þór, Loki and their servant with contests of strength and skill. At the end of the story, everything is revealed to be tricks and illusion, including Útgarðaloki’s giant size. However, the imagery of Þór trying in futility to wake a giant, whose head is the size of a mountain, endures beyond the explanation at the end, and the *jötnar* continue to be described as giants, when it is clear from numerous interactions that they are not particularly larger than the *æsir* or *vanir*.

The *æsir*, *vanir* and *jötnar* can more likely be considered akin to three tribes, who sometimes live among each other through intermarriage and trading of royal hostages. However, when the *van* Frey marries the etin-maid Gerð, they live together in Ásgarð without becoming *æsir*. By contrast, Loki is never called anything but an *áss*, no different from Þór or Óðin. Even Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic writer who started so much negative press about Loki, never suggests that Loki is a *jötun*, consistently counting him among the *æsir*.

The terms *gjør* and *gýgr* are then used for trolls and ogres, rather than *jötnar*. As such, neither the idea that Loki is a *jötun*, nor that a *jötun* is a giant, is accurate.

## 2. Loki tricked the blind Höðr into killing his peaceful brother, Baldr.

In the English language, this myth is not only the most oft-told Loki myth, it may well be the most oft-told Norse myth. The reason for its widely spread presence is because the first English anthropologist to receive popular publication, James Frazer, wrote the two-volume *Balder the Beautiful* in 1913. Of Nordic mythology, Frazer studied one version of the Baldr myth exclusively and then reconstructed an entire cult of Baldr in heathen times. Since then, the cult of Baldr has been shown to be built upon false premises and nineteenth-century poetry<sup>3</sup>.

This does not diminish the version of the Baldr myth used by Frazer, of course, but rather that evidence has its own problems. No less than eight mediæval sources mention Baldr’s death, and few of them have much in common.

First are the eddic poems *Völuspá*, *Völuspá in skamma*, *Lokasenna* and *Baldrs draumar*<sup>4</sup>. *Völuspá* is one of the most important poems of Nordic mythology, in which Óðin speaks to a seeress to receive her prophecy. After establishing her knowledge of things past, but before she will continue, the seeress asks Óðin, *Vituð ér enn, eða hvað?* (‘Would you know more, or what?’), with the first such instance followed by Óðin paying her in jewels and arm-rings to keep her singing. The seeress continues to use this refrain to mark separations in topic for the rest of the poem, with the implication that Óðin continues to pay for each parcel of knowledge. One such separation is between the depiction of Baldr’s death and that of Loki’s bondage, as in the mind of the poet, these were unrelated topics.

The separation between these two topics widens in *Völuspá in skamma* to ten stanzas, and this irregular and damaged poem even contains a detail not present in the larger poem, after which Snorri named it. In it, Höðr is called *Baldrs handbani* (‘Baldr’s killer by hand’), implying another must be *Baldrs ráðbani* (‘Baldr’s killer by rede’), although this kenning does not occur in Norse poetry. The terms *handbani* and *ráðbani* occur in Old Norse legal texts when one man hires or instructs another man to kill on his behalf, although it could also be used if the killer does not know how to accomplish the deed, and another man gives him the counsel on how best to accomplish it. In either case, one man killed with his hand, and the other man killed with his rede. The only clue to be found for the other half of this arrangement is a comment Loki makes to Frigg in *Lokasenna* 28: *eg Því réð er Þú riða sér-at siðan Baldur að sölum* (literal translation: ‘I gave my rede so that Baldr would not ride to solace’).

There is no equivalent to this clue in *Baldrs draumar*, the only heathen source devoted to discussing the death and avenging of Baldr, and the only mention of Loki in that poem is in the final stanza. In a similar situation to *Völuspá*, Óðin is seeking wisdom from a seeress, only this time they part on explicitly poor terms, and she leaves saying, *svo komir manna meir aftur á vit, er laus Loki liður úr böndum og ragna rök riúfendur koma* (literally: ‘so I will not come back to men until after Loki loosens his bonds and doomsday’s rending end comes’). Her only mention of Loki is in a manner similar to *Völuspá*, where he is unrelated to the story of Baldr’s death.

The next source is still a heathen poem, *Húsdrápa*, written by Úlfr Uggason in 978 CE, however this only describes Baldr’s funeral, and provides no information about his death. The partial image from these five poems is the extent of heathen testimony about this myth.

Two hundred years later, Saxo Grammaticus wrote *Gesta Danorum*, a Latin redaction of Danish legend and mythology. In it, he tells how the brothers Hotherus and Balderus vied for the love of a woman, until Hotherus used a magic sword to kill Balderus. He mentions a ‘saga of Hotherus’ as his source, which may or may not be the Icelandic *Hromundars saga*. In that relatively obscure text, the hero is Hromundar and one of several villains is named Baldr. Baldr dies in a battle in which Hromundar also fights with his magic sword, Misteltein (ON for mistletoe, meaning ‘poison twig’), but the two never fight each other. No other surviving source has been suggested to correspond to Saxo’s ‘saga of Hotherus’.

Shortly after Saxo’s version the most famous account of Baldr’s death was written by Snorri Sturluson, in his *Edda*. The larger work is one of the greatest contributions to the survival of Old Norse poetry and as a result, the mythology of the heathen period. There is no doubt that Snorri was fully Christian, and as he was writing two hundred years after Iceland legally converted to Christianity by vote at the national assembly, there was no implication that he was promoting the heathen religion. He loved the old poems, much as Norse scholars and enthusiasts do today, and wanted them preserved. However, he found that the knowledge to understand the poems was disappearing, and so he wrote a primer on how to read the poetry. The name *Edda* is generally regarded to mean ‘poetics’ and in a backwards reference, the poetry he was elucidating has since come to be called ‘eddic’. (In the Icelandic context, it is called *kveða* poetry, which simply refers to the chanting style of singing that is still practiced to this day.)

Much of the *Edda* is a discussion of Old Norse poetic techniques. One important device is that many gods and other figures have *heiti*, or by-names. Óðin has well over a hundred, his more well known including *Alföðr* (‘All-father’) and *Valföðr* (‘Father of the slain’). Loki is known as *Loptur* (‘Lofty’) and *Hveðrung* (‘Roarer’?). Another common technique is the kenning, a circumlocution by which a person or thing is described according to their relationship to another person or thing. Travelling by sea is called the ‘whale-road’ while battle is described as the ‘din of spears’ and the death from that battle is the ‘sleep of the sword’. However, to understand the content of these kennings, the listener must know the reference being made. Calling *Mjöllnir* as ‘Hrungnir’s slayer’ is not clear if the story of *Hrungnir* is unknown to the audience. As such, large portions of the *Edda* are devoted to telling the stories that these poems use as their vocabulary, so Snorri could share his appreciation with us.

Whenever possible, Snorri quoted his sources, such that there are poems that we only know from the stanzas that he quoted in the *Edda*. The fact that he never quotes or refers to *Baldrs draumar* is significant, as while there is little new information in that poem that is not present in the sources Snorri had, it has something they do not: the structure of a complete story. In reading *Baldrs draumar*, it is notable how many details from Snorri’s version are absent, and how much they would change the reading of the poem. It is difficult to imagine that Snorri would have written the same myth had he access to *Baldrs draumar*, given some of the details that are unique to his version:

- Höðr, whose name means ‘war,’ is only blind in *Edda*.
- Baldr, whose name means either ‘bold’ or ‘lord,’ is only peaceful in *Edda*.
- The murder weapon as a sprig of mistletoe, which does not grow in Iceland, rather than a magic sword, potentially called *Misteltein*, is only in *Edda*.
- The kenning *Baldrs ráðbani*, and that accusation against Loki, only exists in *Edda*.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Snorri claims the feast described in *Lokasenna* was held to discuss the punishment for Loki's crime in helping to kill Baldr. However, this is clearly not the case, as if it were, his comment in stanza 28 would be a confession. In such a case, the assembled gods would have an excuse to punish him, and this would serve well as a climax for the poem. However, this supposed confession comes less than halfway into the poem, receives no response from the other gods, and does nothing to even slow the rhythm of the insults.

As a result of these problems in Snorri's version, many theories have been brought forth to explain the source of his details and discrepancies. A regular favourite is the betrayal of Christ by Judas Iscariot, but the superficial similarity between 'blind Höðr' killing Baldr and the blind Longinus killing Christ simply do not explain other details. These details could easily come, however, from the Irish story known as *Aided Fergusa*, in which the blind Lugaid is tricked into throwing a javelin at his foster-brother Fergus by the jealous Aillil, in a very precise manner that had to be followed to kill him.

Following this rather direct explanation of Snorri's version (in *The Problem of Loki*, by Jan de Vries), several other scholars have attempted to defend it as authentic. Most notable is Georges Dumézil, who spent half of his work *Loki* attempting to show how a tale discovered in the Caucasus in the nineteenth century was descended from a common Indo-European source as *Aided Fergusa* and the Baldr myth. Others have added a story in *Kalevala* as another descendent of this alleged prehistoric source, apparently forgetting that Finnish culture is not Indo-European, but the original theory suffers badly enough under scrutiny. At the time Snorri wrote, he had already spent several winters in the halls of Nordic royalty with their skálds, frequently well-travelled to Ireland, where the Norse had traded, wintered and occasionally conquered for five centuries. With such easy contact with tales from that culture, which produced numerous stories where the hero has a single fatal weakness, a common oral tradition going back millennia to proto-languages, is neither necessary nor indicated.

More recently is the work of Karl Hauck, who spent much of his "Bracteates articles" associating a few single-sided coins to the Merseberg charms, which either mention Baldr, or may use baldr as a term for a lord. Over the course of these articles are claims that a "wing-god" is Óðin, who is apparently also a "healing-god" according to Hauck. When "Óðin" appears next to a big fish, this is supposed to be Jörmungand, as a scene inspired by Jonah and Leviathan (as Óðin does not generally encounter the Midgarð Serpent otherwise). However, when "Óðin" appears next to two figures, one of which is stabbing the other with a spear, this is supposed to be an early depiction of Loki killing Baldr, even though such a depiction contradicts Snorri's version, the only one where Loki is supposed to be involved.

I have no idea why the Baldr myth attracts such elaborate and absurd theories, but none are as feasible as the simple conclusion that Snorri rewrote a known Irish legend to fit the few details he had. Alternately, he could have heard it at the noted winter gatherings of King Hákon Hákonarson, from a skáld who improvised a story based on the partial details available and an existing tale.

### **3 & 4. There is no indication of a cult of Loki, as no personal or place-names are in his honour.**

These two comments are often repeated together like this, despite producing such a complete non sequitur, and as such, I shall answer them together.

The second clause is the more obviously false, with hundreds of Icelandic men in mediæval and modern times named Loptur, a *heiti* of Loki's, and the Icelandic name for the star Sirius being *Lokabrenna* ('Loki's brand')<sup>5</sup>. Further, a quick survey of the U.N. gazeteers for Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden produces dozens of towns and other places beginning with a genitive form of Lok-. Not all of them are related to Loki, but a few clearly are, such as Lokehall in Vestergötland (as has been noted since Jacob Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology* in 1883).

However, while personal and place-names to Loki certainly hint at the possibility of an ancient cult, it is no more proof of one than their absence would be proof against one. A more tangible indication is that worship of Sirius, the brightest star of the night, was common in the ancient world. According to the well-travelled Ibrahim ibn Ahmed at-Tartushi, the Danish town of Hedeby was no exception<sup>6</sup>.

## 5. Loki is bound until ragnarök.

The collected evidence for this idea is immense, except that the one source which could easily have inspired all the others is *Völuspá*, and it does not actually say Loki is bound—quite the opposite!

In the pattern mentioned earlier, where the seeress regularly asks Óðin if he wishes to know more, the shortest snippet of information she conveys before requiring Óðin to cross her palm again with silver is stanza 34:

<i>Haft sá hun liggja</i>	Here the Hunnish one lies
<i>undir Hveralundi,</i>	under Hverland,
<i>lægjarns líki</i>	looking harmful like
<i>Loka áþekktan;</i>	Loki's appearance;
<i>Par situr Sigyn,</i>	there sits Sigyn,
<i>Þeygi um sínum</i>	with her husband
<i>ver velglýjuð.</i>	yet not gladdened.
<i>Vituhð er enn - eða hvað?</i>	Would you know more - or what?

These eighteen words of information are apparently the most valuable in the poem, being the shortest passage before requiring further payment. The phrase *líki Loka áþekktan* ('like Loki's appearance') conveys the distinct indication that the one bound only looks like Loki. When understood in the full context, the meaning is clear: "there is someone else bound in the place of Loki, now pay up to hear more."

One possibility for who this might be comes from Saxo Grammaticus. While he euhemerised the gods in Latin and can hardly be considered the most reliable source, *Gesta Danorum* provides the only clue for someone who might appear to be Loki. In his version of the Útgarðaloki myth, it is not Þór but a hero named Thorkillus who finds this figure, described as an ancient god, but he is chained to the rocks inside a cave, and has been for long enough that his breath and body odor have become fatal. As this description does not appear anywhere else, it may represent a Danish variation of the myth.

This idea, that Útgarðaloki is the one bound as Loki, is hardly proveable, but the conclusion that someone else is there in his place is obvious.

## 6. Loki is the adopted son of Óðin, the adopted brother of Þór.

This is an invention of Marvel Comics and nothing else. I mention it only because the Thor movies had millions of viewers who are unaware of how little Marvel based their stories on authentic Norse myths, and so I have encountered this line repeated about the god Loki in addition to the supervillain Loki.

## 7. Loki is the blood-brother of Óðin.

This statement is a far more pervasive idea regarding Loki's relationship to Óðin, although it originated in a book that is not regarded as serious scholarship any more highly than the works of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. That work is *Myths of the Norsemen* by H.A. Guerber, a notoriously inaccurate source from 1895 that merges facts, theories and creative ideas equally with no distinctions to hint at which are which. I have joined other scholars in confused curiosity, spending hours in libraries trying to find some clue as to where Guerber came up with some of her ideas, and coming up with no previous known sources for so many statements she blithely inserted between authentic lore and popular theories of the day. She was writing a children's primer on Norse mythology, and seemed to have no regard for the subject as anything but idle fantasy. Unfortunately, those who came after her were unaware of her lack of respect for the original material, and numerous strange ideas have perpetuated for more than a century because of her.

Until Helen Guerber wrote that Loki and Óðin were blood-brothers, the two kennings for Loki of *Býleists bróðir* and *Helblinda bróðir* were taken at face value, with both Býleist and Helblind established *heiti* of Óðin from other poems. Since her work, however, blood-brotherhood has become the explanation for both of those kennings, except for the occasional odd scholar like Rydberg who postulated two other sons for Fárbaumi and Laufey, with the same names as two *heiti* of Óðin. The apparent defense for this explanation comes from the ninth stanza of *Lokasenna*, where Loki asks,

<i>Mantu Pað, Óðinn,</i>	Do you remember, Óðin,
<i>er við í árdaga</i>	when in days past
<i>blendum blóði saman?</i>	we blended our blood together?
<i>Ölvi bergja</i>	The bearing of ale
<i>létzu eigi mundu,</i>	you would not allow,
<i>nema okkur væri báðum borið</i>	unless it were borne to us both.

This easy answer does little to explain why ale bearing would be important in an oath of brotherhood, unless it were representative of something far more important, such as the *gildi* ('offerings') that is the sticking point for peace between the *æsir* and *vanir* in *Völuspá* 23. Although, if it is taken to mean that Óðin pledged to not accept offerings of alcohol from worshippers unless it is also offered to Loki, the fact that Óðin acknowledges this oath in the following stanza has substantial implications for Óðinnic practitioners. In any matter, any careful reading of a literal translation draws serious question to whether this stanza is describing blood-brotherhood, or some other kind of oath.

Further, this idea falls into another common misconception, that blood-brotherhood was a normal part of Old Norse culture. Typically, when two men took an oath of brotherhood, they took each other as foster-brothers, not blood-brothers. There is a very particular example of blood brothers in *Örvar-Odds saga*, which has a detailed description of a ritual of lifting a piece of turf with a spear and mingling of the two warriors' blood in the earth before replacing the ground (showing that even legendary mediæval Norsemen knew better than to rub their open wounds into each other). However, in general practice, when two men not born of the same parents declare themselves to be brothers, there is no blending of blood and the terms that appear for this relationship in Old Norse are *fóstbróðir* ('foster-brother') or *eidbróðir* ('oath-brother'). The noted *Blood-Brothers' Saga* is *Fóstbræðra saga* in the original.

By recognising that the explanation of blood-brotherhood actually raises more questions than it answers, we can return to the previous understanding of the texts, that Loki is Óðin's brother.

## 8. Loki's father is named Laufey.

Loki's full name is indeed Loki Laufeyjarson. However, Laufey is a female name. No full explanation is given why Loki uses a matronym rather than a patronym, although the usual reasons are for an unrecognised bastard or an estranged son who refuses to use his father's name. Loki's father is given as Fárbaumi ('cruel striker', suggested as an allusion to lightning) in the skáldic poem *Haustlöng* and a line from the poet Úlf Uggason as quoted by Snorri. However, given that Loki is Óðin's brother, any explanation of Fárbaumi should try to reconcile the meaning as a *heiti* of Burr, their father.

## 9. Loki is the enemy of Þór and the Æsir.

Other than Marvel comics, the notion of Loki being Þór's enemy appears to largely be the result of reading the ending of *Lokasenna*, where Þór serves as the bouncer of Ægir by removing Loki from the hall. However, it is not compatible with a reading of *Prymskviða*, much of Snorri's *Edda*, and especially *Þórdrápa*, where the kenning *bragðmilldr Loka* ('compassionate/friendly to Loki') is given of Þór. In these myths, Þór chooses Loki as his favourite travelling companion whenever faring to *Jötunheim*.

The idea that Loki is the enemy of the *æsir*, besides being based on the misconception of Loki not being an *áss* himself, appears to be dependant upon Loki's role in Snorri's version of *ragnarök*. In it, Loki leads the forces of destruction to destroy the *æsir*, as opposed to in *Völuspá*, where he rides the same boat to take him to the battlefield. Also in Snorri's version, Loki and Heimdall kill each other, although this is in no other source. Whether or not this is accurate does not especially matter, it would only mean that Loki has a score to settle with Heimdall, not with the rest of the *æsir*.

## 10. Loki is the father of lies.

The basis for this one is simple enough: Snorri allegedly says so, in *Skáldskaparmál* 15, when listing kennings for Loki, one is *bölvasmiðr*, often translated as "father of lies." However, the exact translation of this kenning is 'bale-smith', one who creates misery. Other words Snorri uses to describe Loki, which are often mistranslated to mean dishonesty or lying, are *frumkveða flærðanna* ('seductive-speaking'), *slægi* ('sly') and *vælandi* ('debasing'). While none of these are especially complimentary, neither do they mean dishonesty. Loki is very talented with his words, of course, and knows how to use them effectively, but no ancient source indicates that he ever lies or breaks an oath.

The closest he comes to lying is when he lures Iðunna out of Ásgarðr with her apples. Unfortunately, this has also been mistranslated, with several versions in English stating that Loki tells Iðunna he saw apples more beautiful than hers, when the original does not have this. Loki says he *hefir fundit epli, Þau er henni munu gripir í Pykkja* ('found some apples she would think worth having'), and then he suggests she bring her own apples for comparison. The text is unclear on whether the forest actually had any particularly lovely apples, and this is as close as Snorri provides us with a lie.

However, the only source Snorri had for this myth was the skáldic poem *Haustlög*, which he quotes at length. In this earlier version of the myth, dating to heathen times, not even this statement is given, it is only said that Loki caused her to arrive at the giant's court.

## 11. Loki is the god of fire.

This statement is no longer necessarily false, in that it has become self-fulfilling. However, the idea that this was the case to ancient heathens is very likely wrong. The first association of Loki with fire comes from Snorri, but while he pits Loki against Logi ('flame'), he appears to only be making a pun from this, not equating the two. However, in the following centuries, dozens of folk sayings arose where Loki was blamed for summer heat, sparks from a bonfire, scalded food and other fire-related events. Then in the nineteenth century, several etymologies were suggested for Loki being derived from *logi*. Oddly, none of them used the -ki suffix for diminutive and familiar names such as 'kraki,' as this would produce the natural result of Lokki from addressing 'Fire' directly (as Log-ki), with Lokki surviving as the Færoese name of the god. Nonetheless, this etymology has not found support among linguists, who usually consider Loki derived from *loka* ('close, lock, end' making Loki 'god of closure').

Following the *logi* etymology, when Richard Wagner adapted Nordic myth for his Ring cycle, he translated Loki into German as Loge ('fire') and gives him fiery powers. Between the popularity of these operas and the commonly repeated Loki-*logi* association, most of the depictions of Loki since have involved fiery imagery. This is supported by the experiences of most Loki's folk today, who regularly encounter Loki as a god of fire, but in any ancient context, the idea is tenuous at best.

## 12. Loki is the god of evil, the Nordic devil.

At this point, the problems with this depiction should be obvious, as the devilish Loki is built upon a foundation of the other misconceptions listed. However, the underlying reasons for portraying Loki as a Nordic devil figure are not addressed simply by proving the inadequacy of this image.

The obvious reason why many heathens so easily adopt this image of Loki is as a leftover from Christian dualism, often represented with the 'gods vs. giants' attitude addressed above. While the problems with this are easily addressed, such as showing that the *jötun*-descended *æsir* are not warring against their relatives, Jörð and Mímir, and that the etin-maids Gerð and Skaði live in Ásgarð, the ingrained dualism in our psychology proves much more difficult. Certainly there are opposites in Nordic religion, such as *muspel* ('fire') and *nífl* ('ice'), but very few beings represent an embodiment of these concepts, and all of those that do are considered 'giants.' Thus, one of the best valid dualisms in Nordic cosmology has both opposites on the same side of the 'gods vs. giants' dualism.

However difficult the process of removing the need for a Nordic devil, a different problem emerges when simply removing Loki from that position, which is fortunately easy to address. That problem is that if Loki is not the Nordic devil, what role does he play in Nordic cosmology?

The answer is that of a trickster. Unfortunately, this word is associated with 'safe' pranksters and cartoonish depictions of malice, which are completely inappropriate. When a more developed understanding of this archetype is explored, using it to describe Loki makes more sense.

First of all, a trickster provides and is called a culture-hero, which Loki fulfills directly or indirectly for the net, Óðin's spear and horse, and Frey's boat. A trickster can also re-provide that which is lost, which Loki does for Iðunna's apples, Þór's hammer and Sif's hair. More obviously, a trickster makes us laugh, and most of the stories involving Loki are funny above all else, with some events having no other purpose, such as tying his balls to a goat's beard. Tricksters also cross boundaries, such as Loki's familiarity with Ásgarð, Jötunheim and Hel, and his regular violations of social and sexual taboos. A trickster is typically related to a creation god, often as a younger brother such as Coyote to Wolf. Sometimes the trickster interferes with creation, and gives it a direction not anticipated, such as Raven giving light and Prometheus giving fire to humanity. This was likely the original role for the Serpent of Eden, before that figure was merged with Satan, by giving knowledge and freedom to humanity.

Towards this, many scholars identify Loki with Lóður in *Völuspá*, which makes even more sense when Loki is the brother rather than blood-brother of Óðin. That god's gifts to humanity are *lá* ('hair' or 'vitality'), *læti* ('voice' or 'manners') and *litu goða* ('good looks'). Similar to light, fire or 'knowledge of good and evil', these traits are especially important in defining humanity as separate from other animals, and get us into plenty of trouble.

When taken in this context, and remembering that Hœnir is also described as Óðin's brother, other ambiguous portions of both eddic poetry and Snorri's *Edda* are elucidated. When Óðin's brothers are in some creation myths they are called Vili ('willful') and Véi ('sanctuary' or 'temple?'), and then when transforming two trees into Ask and Embla, they are called Hœnir and Lóður. Elsewhere in the *Edda*, one of the few times Óðin is described taking a journey, he is travelling with Hœnir and Loki. As in a couple of texts, Vili is written as Víli ('wiley'), and Hœnir takes a rôle in the myths of a peacemaker and preserver, the solution is simple: Véi is a *heiti* of Hœnir, while Vili/Víli and Lóður are *heiti* of Loki.

One other problem that emerges in calling Loki a trickster is the common mistake to overestimate the similarities of different figures in modern paganism. Just because Loki and Coyote are both tricksters, does not mean they act or should be treated the same. But that is still far less of a mistake than treating Loki like Lucifer.

### 13. Loki is a hypostasis of Óðin.

This is an idea that has been suggested by serious scholars such as Lee Hollander in his translation of *The Poetic Edda* (a collection of the poems that Snorri was elucidating), but it has never been developed and defended as a theory. Unfortunately, a question in a footnote can be mistaken for a statement of fact in some heathen circles, while forgetting a rather insurmountable problem: nowhere is the Catholic trinitarian concept of a hypostasis of God indicated in Norse cosmology. It may seem like a natural concept, rather than a bizarre abstraction, to those who were raised with the Nicene Crede and its



theology. However, the notion that a god can take separate forms, and be incarnate such as the Christian God is simultaneously the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is completely foreign to paganism.

Gods may take various forms, and Óðin certainly goes by many different *heiti*, but nowhere in Norse myths does a god split into multiple beings and have a conversation with themselves.

- *Selváru Stigård*

## Notes:

1. Snorri Sturluson, in the forward to *Edda*.
2. For those who require more evidence that the *jötnar* are a group of gods, besides the *æsir* and *vanir* interacting with them as peers, see Gro Steinsland, "Giants as Recipients of Cult in the Viking Age?" *Words and Objects* (Oslo, 1986), despite its acceptance of using 'giant' as the standard English translation of *jötun*.
3. John Stanley Martin, "Baldr's Death and The Golden Bough" *Iceland and the Mediaeval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell*. (Victoria, Australia, 1974).
4. Eddic poetry displays the traits of an oral tradition developed over the course of centuries, such as described in the Albert Lord seminal work, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, 1960) and several books by Ruth Finnegan, such as *Oral poetry: its nature, significance, and social context* (Cambridge, 1977). A number of articles using a solid foundation of work that places eddic poetry within the larger context of oral-formulaic systems can be found in *Edda: A Collection of Essays* (Manitoba, 1983).
5. The name *Lokabrenna* first occurs in eighteenth-century manuscripts according to *Íslensk Orðsifjabók* (Orðabók Háskólans, 1989), but as there are no earlier references to Sirius in Icelandic or Old Norse literature, it is impossible to determine its origin.
6. Jacqueline Simpson, *The Viking World* (New York, 1967) quotes on p. 91 the account of Ibrahim ibn Ahmed at-Tartushi, who visited Hedeby in the 950s: "Its inhabitants are worshippers of Sirius, except for a few who are Christians and have a church there. They hold a feast at which they all gather to honour their god and to eat and drink. Whoever kills a beast as a sacrifice sets up a pole at the door of his house and hangs the animal up on it (whether ox, ram, he-goat, or pig); thus people know he has made an offering to honour his god." Of course, to an Arab from Cordova, if they visited at a time of a particular feast, it would seem to them that everyone was a worshipper of the god who was honoured by that feast. It is unknown whether *Lokabrenna* was the name of Sirius throughout the Nordic world, but it is the only name that has survived.