

**Thor and Tyr:
Revealing the Indo-European Sky God
by Timothy J. Stephany**
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Abstract:

The Norse god Thor is a god of thunder and Tyr is a god of the sky, yet both appear to be linked back to the original Indo-European sky god Tiwaz (who also led to the thunder gods Zeus and Jupiter and the Indian sky god Dyaus). Thor's hammer and wagon relate to his role as god of thunderstorms, wherein he did battle with trolls and fought back the frost giants to drive back the winter. There is also an association between the thunder god and the elves, who were thought to reside within mountains, as was the wind. In this relation to the elves, Thor is also connected with the goddess Bertha through the giantess Grid (Brid/Brith) and the giantess Iarnsaxa. Tyr himself is the same as Dyaus, who was consort of Prithvi, a goddess also equivalent to Bertha. Tyr's single hand may be a reference to the Sun as a shield, while his adversary, the dog Garm, may appear upon the Moon. The contest between the sky god and a serpent or wolf might imply some distant connection, but specific details that would link the gods together are otherwise lacking within the mythology.

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Introduction

The most powerful god among the Aesir was the thunder god Thor, also known as Vingthor (wind-Thor) and Hlorridi (loud rider). He was the patron of farmers and sailors and formerly a god of war and the sky. He was said to be son of the earth (Iord) and Odin. It says of him in Gylfaginning:

Thor has two goats whose names are Tanngniost [teeth-gnasher] and Tanngrimir [teeth-grinder], and a chariot that he drives in, and the goats draw the chariot. From this he is known as Oku-Thor. He also has three special possessions. One of them is the hammer Miollnir [lightning], well known to frost-giants and mountain-giants when it is raised aloft, and that is not to be wondered at: it has smashed many a skull of their fathers and kinsmen. (Sturluson 1987: 22)

Tyr by comparison is a background figure among the Aesir, most prominent in the story of the binding of the wolf.¹ While Tyr is a brave god of battle, he is like Odin in that “he has great power over victory in battles. It is good for men of action to pray to him.” (Sturluson 1987: 24) Tyr was also a god of the sword and the sky who was known for having only one hand.

God of Thunder

¹ As the name ‘tyr’ is also means ‘god’, and Tyr’s appearance in ‘Hymiskvida’ might refer to another god, perhaps Loki (MacCulloch 1964: 100).

Thor is directly associated with the thunderstorm and each time he threw his hammer it would return to his hand, allowing him to use it many times, creating one lightning bolt after another.² There is also the rumbling that his wagon makes when it is passing over the ground, as a source of thunder.³ Thor was once the god of war and ‘thunder’ was used as a poetic term for battle (Sturluson 1987: 158).⁴

Thor was called Reidartyr or Reidityr (wagon-god) and Vagna-verr (wagon-man) (Grimm 2004: 196). In Sweden when they heard thunder used to say “the good old fellow drives” (*godgubben åker*) and in Gothland “Thor’s driving” (*Thors akan*) (MacCulloch 1964: 78). They would also say “the *gracious God* is angry” (Grimm 2004: 167) and Thor’s tendency to be quick to anger and quick to lose it again might have something to do with the passing nature of powerful storms. In Norse legend he was to have provided rain when asked but would send a storm when he was angry (Grimm 2004: 175).⁵ In southern Germany he was known as ‘kettle-vendor’ because they imagined his brazen chariot must have been filled with copper kettles to produce such a noise (Guerber 1992: 62).

Thor’s association with the goat would arise from the similarity between the cracking of thunder and the crack of two billy goats butting horns.⁶ This association between Thor and the goat would also have been the motive behind thinking that Thor was the god of the peasants. Odin, on the other hand, was associated with the horse, and thus Odin was seen as the god of the nobles. Odin makes sure Thor remembers this in ‘Harbardzliod’, by taunting him:

² The Indian sky god Indra has a spear that he throws that never misses its mark. It will also return to his hand whether he throws it or someone else does. (Grimm 2004: 1569)

³ Wheels with iron rims and iron horse-shoes were said to occasionally spark when going fast over stone (Grimm Brothers 1997: 544 and Booss 1984: 77, 276).

⁴ The Germans believed that the war god was within the storm cloud (Paul the Deacon 2003: 37f).

⁵ “The peasant in Vermland calls the south-west corner of the sky, whence the summer tempests mostly rise, *Thorshåla*”. (Grimm 2004: 171) According to Guerber, Thor was said to travel from west to east, along the direction of the spring storms (1992: 68).

⁶ An Indian thunder deity was represented as a one-footed goat (Keith 1964: 36).

‘Odin has the nobles who fall in battle
and Thor has the breed of serfs.’

(Larrington 1999: 73)

The connection of Thor with the hammer also makes him god of the blacksmith. The typical depiction of Thor’s hammer puts most of the mallet’s weight close to the handle and the description of his hammer as having a short handle, both features that make an ideal hammer for metal-working on an anvil. Hammers of this design were used by smiths during the Viking age (Fitzhugh 2000: 49, *fig 2.12*). In Tornio Lappmark, thunder is called *Pajan*, i.e., ‘the blacksmith,’ from the Finnish word *paja* ‘smithy.’ (Læstadius 2002: 91). This too is told in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* when Magnus Nilsson in 1125 AD sacked a pagan temple in Sweden:

He made sure that he brought home some hammers of an unusual weight, which they call Jupiter’s [Thor’s], used by the people of the island in the ancient religion. For the men of old, seeking to understand the causes of thunder and lightning through the equation of things, took huge heavy hammers of bronze, by which they thought the crashing in the sky might have been caused, reckoning that the mighty and powerful noise might (as it were) very possibly be imitated by the labors of a smith. (Orchard 2002: 354)

The sound of a hammer striking an anvil and the production of sparks would have been connected to the thunderclap of the god’s hammer striking and the lightning as the sparks shoot from it.⁷ So Thor was associated not only with lightning but with sparks as well. He was even

⁷ The thunderhead resembles an anvil and today are called ‘anvil clouds’. Guerber states that the thunderhead was known as ‘Thor’s hat’ (Guerber 1992: 62).

said to have a piece of whetstone lodged in his head, and a whetstone would have been known to spark when sharpening an axe or blade.⁸

Thor's adversaries are the giants of winter, ice and frost. The storms of the spring are the coming of the god to fight back the winter. His relation to storms caused Thor to also be god of the wind and rain, and thus fertility.⁹ From these concepts arose several more specific stories that detail his conflicts with notable giants, as well as his greatest adversary, the Midgard Serpent. This serpent, called Iormundgand (great monster), was thought to inhabit the world ocean that surrounded the continent, and it was so long that its mouth bit at its own tail.¹⁰ Thor's confrontation with this beast was the most famous of his battles.

Thor and the Elves

It was thought at the times these myths were relevant that wisdom or inspiration could be gained from their spirits by sleeping or meditating upon burial mounds. The spirits of the dead living on under the ground is strongly connected to the belief in little men who inhabit the hills and mountains. These are later divided between the elves who live in hillocks and the dwarfs who live in mountain caves. The land of the elves was known as Alfaheim (elf-world) and the dwarfs as Svartalfaheim (dark elf-world). Dwarfs living in the mountains were thought to be the source of echoes, called *dverga-mal* (speech of dwarfs) (MacCulloch 1964: 269). The dwarfs Austri, Vestri, Nordri, Sudri were sometimes known as the sources of the four winds (Grimm 2004:

⁸ Guerber states that sparks shoot from the goats' gnashing teeth and hooves as they pull Thor's chariot (Guerber 1992: 62).

⁹ A he-goat was hung from the mast of a ship to appeal for a favorable wind (Grimm 2004: 1472).

¹⁰ He may have been considered the source of ocean waves.

461). The *vätters*, *vätts*, or *landvaettir* (land-spirits) inhabited fields and fells, underground and in mountains, and one should not do whatever might frighten them away.¹¹ In Norway the elves were known as *huldre*, *huldren* or *huldu-folk* (hidden folk) and in England as brownies or pixies. There were also household spirits who could be propitiated to protect the house. In Sweden these guardians were called *tomts* or *tomten* and are described in the fairy tale “The Tomts” from Östergötland:

In descriptions of Tomts we are told that they look like little men well along in years, and in size about that of a child three or four years old, as a rule clad in coarse gray clothes and wearing red caps upon their heads. They usually make the pantry or barn their abiding place, where they busy themselves night and day, and keep watch over the household arrangements. (Booss 1984: 285)

This description similar to the Mount-folk of Scandinavian fairy tales, said to inhabit old grave mounds. These are described as being very little men wearing red caps, with crooked legs and a humped back, with a long beard and hair (Booss 1984: 479).¹² At Easter, Whitsuntide and Yuletide it is said a dish of milk-porridge was set out for the Mount-folk (Booss 1984: 480).

Cup marks in round stones were known as fairy cups or dishes and people filled them with milk for the elves (Davidson 1996: 156). Their favorite symbol in association with elves was the sun-wheel or *hamarsmark* (Davidson 1996: 156). In Dartmoor there was a practice of leaving grass or needles in the pixies’ hole for them (Grimm 2004: 1411). Special sacrifices were also made to the elves in late autumn. According to Grimm, in the *alfablót* a black lamb or cat was offered up to the *huldren* (Grimm 2004: 1411), and “Little men of the mountain can be conjured

¹¹ The act of *alf-reka* ‘elf-driving’ was forbidden at Helgafell in Iceland (MacCulloch 1964: 227).

¹² These red caps (*tarnkappe*) rendered them invisible and prevented them from being turned to stone in sunlight (Guerber 1992: 240).

up, if you place a new table for them, and set two dishes of milk, two of honey, two plates and nine knives upon it, and kill a *black hen*.” (Grimm 2004: 1010)

Elves are typically thought to be spirits of male ancestors and *disir* to be spirits of female ancestors.

Not only the major gods but also the lesser deities, the *disir* and *álfar* were celebrated with sacrifices...The *álfar*, or elves, were low-grade deities, not strictly gods at all, but figures who were worshipped within the home because of their protective powers. Sighvat, a Christian, who was skald [poet] to St. Olaf, describes in his poem *Austrfararvisur* how he went to heathen Sweden and at night reached a closed house. From inside they answered his knocking by crying out that they were engaged in holy practices. (Bronsted 1965: 286)

‘Come in no further,
wretched fellow’, said the dame,
‘we’re heathens here;
I’m scared of Odin’s wrath.’
The grim crone that checked me,
firmly, as if I were a wolf,
said that inside the house
they were holding elf-sacrifice.
(Orchard 2002: 28)

In ‘Kormak’s Saga’, a bull has been sacrificed at the end of a duel:

‘There’s a certain hillock a short way from here, in which elves live. You are to take the bull that Kormak killed, redden the surface of the hillock with the bull’s blood, and make the elves a feast of the meat, then you’ll recover.’ (Whaley 2002: 58)

Læstadius quotes Leem as saying:

“*Seimestebme* means the sacrifice of liquor or something to some guardian spirit of the home, such as the spirit of the fireplace, the threshold, etc. Moving from one place to another, they poured a little milk or soup on the ground.” (Læstadius 2002: 164)

The sun is variously called ‘elf-disc’, ‘elf-ray’, ‘elf-world’s (sky’s) shine’ or ‘heaven-wheel’.¹³ In the *Poetic Edda* the elves are said to call the sun ‘lovely wheel’ and the moon ‘year-counter’. The elves were also related to the thunder god. As Grimm records, *alpgeschoss* (elf-shot) means thunderbolt, and *alpruthe* (elf-rod) means *donnerkraut* (related to Donar) (Grimm 2004: 187), and “in Scotland the *elf-arrow*, *elf-flint*, *elf-bolt* is a hard pointed wedge believed to have been discharged by spirits; the turf cut out of the ground by lightning is supposed to be thrown up by them.” (Grimm 2004: 460) The German thunder god Donar was known to throw down wedge-shaped stones from the sky to produce lightning (Grimm 2004: 179).¹⁴ Lightning was also known as a source of mortality,¹⁵ as it says in *Kalevala*:

Louhi, mistress of Northland
got wind of the news
that Väinö-land was thriving
Kalevala flourishing
on the Sampo bits it got

¹³ From a riddle in *Hervarar-saga* the sun was said to come through Delling’s door (MacCulloch 1964: 201).

¹⁴ According to German superstition a thunderbolt was a black wedge (flint weapon) that sunk deep into the earth when lightning struck, and was then believed to rise again during subsequent thunderstorms, rising to the surface in either seven or nine years (MacCulloch 1964: 79).

¹⁵ The Greeks did not eat cattle struck dead by lightning (Grimm 2004: 1341), because they may have thought they were already claimed by the god.

the pieces of the bright-lid.
She was very envious
and she keeps thinking
what doom she could bring about
which death she could carry out
on those folk of Väinö-land
those Kalevala people
and she prays to the Old Man
she worships the Thunderer:
'O Old Man, chief god
strike down Kaleva's people
with iron hailstones
with steel-tipped needles;
or else with disease kill them
and slay the mean kin-
the men in the long yards, the
women upon the byre floors!'
(Lonnrot 1989: 585)

Thor's wife was the goddess Sif or the giantess Iarnsaxa (one with an iron knife). The German Berche was said to have a knife with which she would slit open the bellies of those who slighted or insulted her, and was known as Iron Bertha and Wild Bertha (Grimm 2004: 277). The giantess Grid (Brid/Brith), with whom Thor spends time, has a name that is a version of Bertha. This links the two together, and Bertha also ruled over the elves (Grimm 2004: 282). There was also a later association between Thor and the goddess Frigg, the northern Bertha, with whom he was associated on Thursdays. Thursday (Thor's Day) was the holiest day in Sweden, when no

work was done (MacCulloch 1964: 68). On this day the house was prepared for the visiting gods, no spindle or distaff was used, for Frigg herself did the spinning. During this day they would use the expression “hallow the god Thor and Frigg” and in the evening it might be possible to see them both sitting at the distaff. (MacCulloch 1964: 177)

God of the Sky

While a missing hand must not have been an uncommon sight among warriors, the loss of the hand was also a common punishment for perjury, thus depicted in the explanation that he lost it as a consequence of a pledge to trick the wolf-monster Fenrir into being bound. Within the story provided by Snorri the monster, known only as ‘the wolf’, is bound by the fetter Leyding and then a stronger one called Dromi. When the wolf has shown his ability to break free from these, the third fetter was a silken ribbon called Gleipnir is made with the magic of dwarfs. The wolf thus allows himself to be bound but only if one of the gods placed his hand within the wolf’s jaws. They entrap the wolf at the cost of Tyr’s hand.

Then the Aesir went out on to a lake called Amsvartnir [black one], onto an island called Lyngvi [covered with heather], and summoned with them the wolf, showed him the silky band and bade him tear it...When the Aesir saw that the wolf was thoroughly bound they took the cord that was hanging from the fetter, called Gelgia [fetter], and threaded it through a great stone slab—this is called Gioll [booming]—and fastened the slab far down in the ground. Then they took a great rock and thrust it even further into the ground—this is called Thviti [banger]—and used this rock as an anchoring-peg. The wolf stretched its jaws enormously and reacted violently and tried to bite them. They thrust into its mouth a certain sword; the hilt touches its lower gums and the point its upper ones. (Sturluson 1987: 28-29)

Despite the detailed tale provided by Snorri, the myth of Tyr's contest with the wolf was likely a mere description before someone later decided to add some detail to it, and this may have occurred as late as Viking times. However, a passage in *Kalevala* suggests a similar story about the binding of dogs:

'Press the rowan collar down
around his snub nose:
if the rowan will not hold
have one case out of copper;
if the copper is not firm
make a collar of iron;
but if he snaps the iron
if he still goes wrong
wedge a golden cowlstaff from
jawbone to jawbone
jam the ends in hard
fix them really fast
so the bad jaws cannot move
nor the few teeth part, unless
they are shattered with iron
wrenched away with steel
or bloodied with knives
or jerked with an axe!'
(Lonnrot 1989: 457)

The *Poetic Edda* refers to the wolf only as Fenrir, while Snorri gives Fenriswolf as an alternate name.¹⁶ His name means that he is a wolf of the fens.¹⁷ However, it is the dog Garm who is Tyr's killer at Ragnarok and Odin has the fearsome battle with Fenrir. While the Sun god confronting the wolf may have been a motif shared into the Odin tradition, there is no reason that Garm may not have been Tyr's true adversary. In Snorri's tale it is only in the introduction that Fenriswolf is named, otherwise he is referred to as the wolf. Like Fenrir, Garm too is bound, and will also be freed at Ragnarok.

Then will also have gotten free the dog Garm, which is bound in front of Gnipahellir [deep cave]. This is the most evil creature. He will have a battle with Tyr and they will each be the death of the other. (Sturluson 1987: 54)

Garm bays loudly before Gnipa-cave,
the rope will break and the ravener run free,
much wisdom she know, I see further ahead
to the terrible doom of the victory-gods.

(Larrington 1999: 12)

The god Ull (majestic) is a son of Sif and the stepson of Thor. He is god of the sky and the shield, skiing, hunting and the bow—which is why his hall is called Yewdale. The shield was known as 'Ull's ship' (Sturluson 1987: 118), and because he was seen to be crossing water upon his shield, this seems to be another vision of the sun traversing the ocean-sky. One instance in Saxo may be referring to the Sun as Odin's shield:

¹⁶ This gray wolf is also known as Vanargand (monster of the Van) and Hrodvitnir (great wolf).

¹⁷ This might relates to the notion that the Moon was thought to reside beneath the earth when it was not in the sky, and thus the *ignis fatuus* of the swamp was believed to be the glow of either the subterranean Sun or Moon. This is why it was also called Jack o' the Lantern and Will o' the Wisp.

*“If I should set eyes on the fearsome husband of Frigg,
though he is protected by his white shield, and maneuvers
his tall horse, he shall not go unhurt from Leire;
it is right to lay low the warrior god in battle.*

(Grammaticus 1979: 63)

This might also provide a naturalistic explanation for Tyr. As there is seen only Tyr’s shield in the sky (Sun) and not a sword, this might have been so because he had lost his sword hand. This may also relate to the apparent image of Moongarm on the Moon’s face as shown in *Figure 1*. Here it appears that within the image of the wolf the picture emerges of a hand within the beast’s throat. Explaining why a hand appears within this image, that it had clearly been consumed, would provide the final solution to this question.¹⁸

Figure 1.
Garm on the Moon
(may depict a hand within)



¹⁸ It is possible to suppose that Amsvartnir [black one] meant the night sky and that the island Lyngvi was the Moon. This is difficult to prove but is justified since the Sun and Moon motivate all other Norse mythological traditions.

Conclusion

It is difficult to reconcile the specifics of both Tyr and Thor. While Tyr is associated with the wolf Thor is with the serpent. They clearly arose from separate traditions, where Tyr appears to have become associated more closely with the Sun, with his adversary being the Moon, Thor became closely associated with the thunderstorm. However, the gods Zeus and Jupiter, who like Tyr derive from Tiwaz, are more commonly associated with the thunderstorm. It was believed that Zeus would strike people down with his thunderbolt, when travelling through the sky surrounded by black thunder clouds.

The sky god Tyr was associated with the cult of the bull was spread throughout much of Europe, which seems to have been predominantly one of fertility. The name Tyr is related to *taur* (bull) and thus with Taurus. In Norse mythology Tyr's father (or perhaps step-father) is Hymir.¹⁹ The sons of Gefion were said to be bulls by a giant (Sturluson 1987: 7) and Hymir is said to keep bulls, so there is a tenuous implication that Gefion is Tyr's mother. That his mother is described as being 'decked in gold' and 'with shining brows' (Larrington 1999: 79) indicates that she is a goddess.

The Indian mother goddess Prithvi is wife of Dyaus, who is equivalent to Tyr. Prithvi is very likely the same goddess as Freyia and Frigg (Grimm 2004: 303), each related to Bertha (Brid/Brith). Both Frigg and Grid (Brid) are associated with Thor, thus drawing a further point of comparison between Tyr and Thor.

¹⁹ Several prominent giants: Ymir, Hymir, Gyimir, Brimir and Mimir share similar name forms, and might simply be versions of a proto-giant who was present at the divine creation.

Like Thor, Zeus is a god of hills and oak trees, and in the Sami tradition the gods Torden (Thor) and Tiermes (Tyr?) were viewed as different names for the same god (Læstadius 2002: 91). The evidence seems at some point very far back to a time when Tyr and Thor were the same god of the sky and war. As time went on and the gods were to meet again: Thor kept his unique position of god of thunder while Tyr was slowly replaced by the upsurgent Odin.

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