

Mount Allison University

**Thor
God of Thunder**



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By

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To the ancient Germanic peoples, Thor was the mighty god of thunder, but in our society he is a comic book hero. Thor has become part of our pop culture but he was a big part of the ancient Northern European religion. He was their hero whose strength was that of legend and his hammer was greatly coveted. But what do we know of this hero of the ancient Germanic myths?

Thor was the son of Odin, father of the gods, and ruled over the region known as Thrudvanger from Bilskirnir, his lightning castle. This great hall was the largest building ever constructed and it contained “five hundred and forty apartments.”¹ The mighty god of thunder is the owner of three precious and powerful treasures. The most cherished of these being Mjollnir, his mighty hammer. The hammer returns to Thor every time that he throws it, much like a boomerang’s flight. Defending Asgard, the home of the gods, is an easier task with this special weapon which was constructed by two dwarf craftsmen. Loki was attempting to stop them from completing their task as he wagered his head that they could not succeed. Loki transformed himself into a fly and stung the dwarfs as they worked. This caused them to make the handle of the hammer too short. This weapon was sought after by many and was stolen by Thrym the Giant. He demanded that Freya become his wife in return for the hammer. Thor disguised himself in a bridal veil and went to retrieve his property. During the feast the night of Thor’s arrival, he “ate an ox and eight salmon”² by himself. This nearly gave Thor away but

¹Sturluson, Snorri; Edda (Guernsey Press, London, 1997) p. 22

²Davidson, H. R. Ellis; Gods and Myths of Northern Europe (Penguin Books, London, 1990) p. 44

Loki saved the day with a story of the bride-to-be being so excited that she fasted for eight nights. When the hammer was laid in the bride's lap "it was not long before Thrym and all the wedding party were slain."³ The second of his great treasures are a pair of iron-clad gloves which makes it possible for him to wield the mighty Mjollnir. Finally, Thor has a magical belt which increases his strength. Using the three items to his advantage, the Mighty Thor is a force to be reckoned with.

Thor seems to be one of the most important deities of the Germanic pantheon. He is part of the ritual ceremonies for births, marriages, deaths, and funeral. His hammer becomes a similar icon to the Christian cross, with the sign of the hammer used as a blessing by his worshipers. When Hakon the Good, a Germanic Christian king attending an autumn sacrifice, performed the sign of the cross over his cup, the heathens became angry. A friend of the king came to his aid by proclaiming, "The king acts like all those who trust in their strength and might. He made the mark of the hammer over it before he drank it."⁴ The hammer was also worn, much like the Christian cross, as an amulet. There is also evidence of hammers with crosses engraved in them. This coming as more Germanics were converting to Christianity but not wanting to let go of the old ways.

The worshipers of Thor took oaths in the name of their god upon sacred rings of

³Ibid p. 45

⁴Ibid p. 80

silver or gold. “Descriptions of this ring suggest that it was an arm-ring and not a finger-ring.”⁵ This sacred ring could be used by the priest of Thor to defend them from sword blows. Thor’s significance is shown here because of the tremendous importance the Barbarian placed on their word of honor.

The god of thunder was also known for his prowess with the chariot. He was pulled by two goats. “The noise of the chariot of Thor rattling along was said to cause thunder.”⁶ Tanngniost and Tanngriisnir were the two goats that pulled the thunder god’s chariot until one of them went lame. Thor would slaughter the goats, eat them, and then bring them back to life while on his adventures. He would save the bones, place them on the skins of the beasts, and with the sigh of the hammer revive the creatures. However, once during a feast, the son of a peasant broke one of the goat’s thigh bones causing the goat to be resurrected lame. In return for this error, the peasant gave Thor his two children as servants.

Thor is best known as a sky god, the god of thunder, but he is also associated with cremation and inhumation. The mighty Thor was also seen as a god to sea travelers. Sailors would make offerings to Thor to protect them on their journeys. Even though, Thor was recognized as the god of thunder and lightning. He was important to every adventurer and warrior.

⁵Ibid p. 77

⁶Ibid p. 76

Thor had many great adversaries most of which were giants but his most dangerous opponent was the Midgard serpent. “Odin flung it into the deep sea that encircled Midgard, and there it lies around the World biting its own tail.”⁷ The World serpent, as it is also known, faced off against Thor on at least three separate occasions. The final conflict will prove to be fatal for both but the other two encounters were shows of the amazing strength of the god. Thor unknowingly faced the serpent in the hall of Utgard-Loki. Thor, along with his companions, was taking part in a series of trials of strength. Thor drank from a horn that unknowingly had its tip in the sea and he wrestles an old woman who was actually old age in disguise. Another of the trials saw Thor attempting to lift a giant grey cat. The god could only lift the creature’s paw and nothing more. He would come to discover that Utgard-Loki was using powerful magic to create these illusions and the cat was actually the Midgard serpent. The other meeting between the serpent and Thor would come when Thor went on a fishing trip with the giant Hymir. Thor used the head of an ox as bait and attempted to catch the serpent. He hooked the creature and put his feet through the bottom of the boat as he summoned his strength to pull the giant serpent from the depths. Thor and the beast stared at each other as “the giant Hymir changed color, went pale, and panicked”⁸ at the sight. Thor seized his hammer and prepared to throw it at the beast but a frightened Hymir accidentally cut the line releasing the World serpent. Thor became extremely angry and punched the giant knocking him into the sea. Thor’s final meeting

⁷Ibid p. 32

⁸Sturluson; Edda p. 47

with the serpent will be the end for both. The fight will take place during “Ragnarok, the time of the destruction of the gods.”⁹ The serpent will rise from the depths and join in the battle against the gods. “Thor will be victorious over the Midgard serpent and will step away from it nine paces. Then he will fall to the ground dead from the poison which the serpent will spit at him.”¹⁰

Thor would never truly disappear from our vision. He was known by many names throughout Europe including; Asa-Thor, Ása-Thór, Donar, Donner, Thor, Thór, Thunder, Tor, Por. If you examine the list of names and look at the word for Thursday from several different European languages you will see that the day has been named in Thor’s honor. A table follows with the word for Thursday from more than eleven different European languages.¹¹

English:	Thursday, Thunderday
Old English:	Thuresdæg, Thursdæg, Thunresdæg
German:	Donnerstag
Old High German:	Donares-tac
Dutch:	Donderdag

⁹Davidson; Gods and Myths of Northern Europe p. 37

¹⁰Sturluson; Edda p. 54

¹¹Ashliman, D. L.; Thor: The Viking Thunder God; (1997)

<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/thor.html>

(The following chart was created with information from this website.)

Danish, Norwegian, Swedish:	Torsdag
Faroese:	Tórsgatur (local); Hósgatur
Old Icelandic, Old Norse:	Þórsdagur
Modern Icelandic:	Fimmtugatur [fifth day]. After Iceland became Christian most of the older heathen day names were replaced with numbered day names
French:	Jeudi
Latin:	Jovis dies [Jove's day]

Thor suffered an injury, during a duel with Hrungrnir the giant who was armed with a whetstone and a stone shield, that would be represented in many of the figures made in his image. Thor “hurled his hammer at him, while the giant threw his whetstone. The weapons met in mid air, and the whetstone was shattered, but one piece was lodged in Thor’s forehead.”¹² The giant was killed in the duel and would fall on top of Thor. No one could get the dead behemoth’s leg off of the thunder god until Thor’s young son, Magni, came and pushed the heavy limb away. Thor went to a seer to have the stone removed. However, the spells were never finished for the seer became too interested in Thor’s tales about her husband that she forgot to complete the task. Remembering this myth, Thor’s worshipers, made figurines to the thunder god with a small nail in his forehead. The figurine could then be used to kindle fires by

¹²Davidson; Gods and Myths of Northern Europe p. 41

striking a flint stone against the nail.

Thor would become a part of pop culture in the late twentieth century with his first appearance in a comic book entitled, "Journey into Mystery #83," which was released in August of 1962. Soon a series was dedicated to the god in which Odin removed Thor's memories and sent him to earth as a physically-challenged doctor. After some time, Odin decides that Thor has learnt his lesson in humility and wants him to return to Asgard. Dr. Drake then discovers an old walking stick in a cave, while on vacation in Norway, but this is no ordinary stick. When the cane is stuck to the ground, it transforms Drake into Thor and it becomes Mjollnir. Still, without his memories, Thor becomes a super-hero and fights evil on earth. When Odin restores Thor's memory, he asked his son to return to Asgard but he refuses and vows to protect the people of earth until his death.¹³

Thor was the idol to all Germanic barbarian warriors. He would embody everything that they would strive to be. They worshiped this god who, at times, seems like he was used much more for comic relief in some of their myths. This mighty hero had a strong effect on the early European peoples and they could identify themselves with him. He would hold a high place with them even after Christianity swept through

¹³Fritz, Jason; Heroes of Legend: Thor
<http://www.sigma.net/comics/thor.htm>

Europe. In the late twentieth century, Thor's importance would return when humanity once again required a super hero to take them away from their everyday problems.