

Viking mythology

The Vikings were people from what is now Norway, Sweden and Denmark. From the 8th-11th centuries, they sailed off to trade and settle other areas. Wherever they went, they brought their language, Old Norse, and their beliefs with them.


In this way, Viking, or Norse, myths spread far and wide. Later Christianity gradually replaced Viking beliefs, and so their myths about gods, giants and great battles slowly faded from memory. Luckily, they were written down, so we can still read them today.

Yggdrasil and the nine worlds

Vikings believed in a universe centred around Yggdrasil, an enormous ash tree. In its branches were nine separate but interconnected worlds. One was Asgard, the realm of many of the gods, another was Midgard, where humans lived. These two were connected by a rainbow bridge called Bifrost. The other worlds were home to dead people (Niflheim – the underworld), giants (called jötuns), dwarves and elves.

The great war

According to the myths, long ago, there were two tribes of gods: the Æsir (say ee-sir) and the Vanir. A war broke out and lasted for many years. The gods fought each other with magic as well as weapons, but neither group could ever completely defeat the other. Eventually they called a truce and exchanged hostages. There was a period of peace, with the Æsir continuing to live in their home of Asgard, and the Vanir in Vanaheim.



Vikings carved dragons on their ships to make them seem extra-fierce.



This carving showing a Norse story is almost 1,000 years old.

The end of everything

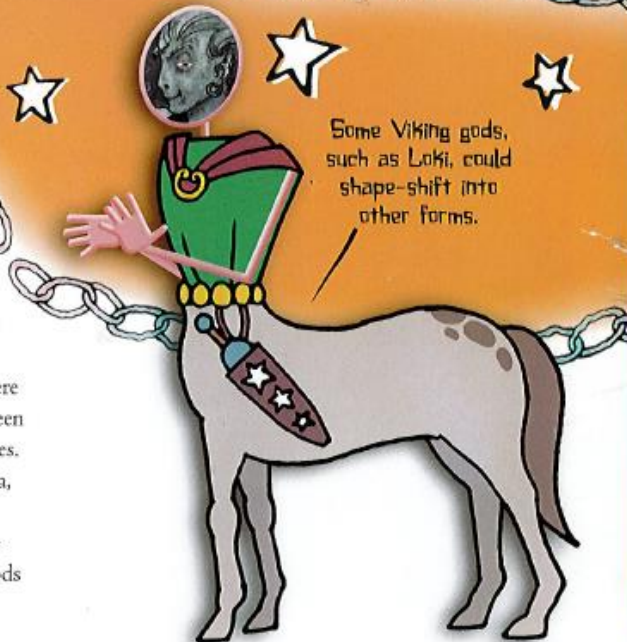
The Vikings believed that the world of gods and humans would eventually end in an epic battle called Ragnarok, fought against the giants. There were many prophecies about who would live and die during this battle. At the end, the world would sink into the sea, but after a while it would be reborn, and some of the gods would return from the dead.



How do we know?

Most of what we know about Norse myths comes from Icelandic sagas, stories that were written down in Iceland between the 12th and the 14th centuries. There are also the Poetic Edda, collections of poems that tell stories of how the world came to be, as well as tales of the gods and their adventures.

Some Viking gods, such as Loki, could shape-shift into other forms.



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Retrieval

- 1) How do we know about Norse myths ?
- 2) Why did people forget about Viking myths ?
- 3) How many worlds did the Vikings believe there were ?

Words in context

- 4) Find and copy a word which means 'a person who is captured by someone who demands that certain things be done before the captured person is freed'.
- 5) Find and copy a word which means 'joined to others'.