

## Reviving Loki

Norse myth is populated with several controversial deities. None, however— not even the enigmatic Odin— reach the level of Loki. This translates into modern practice among pagans, and is especially true among reconstructionist movements such as Heathenry, Germanic Polytheism. Heathenry is a diverse practice pulling from several Germanic traditions, the most popular among them is Norse tradition, inspired mainly by Icelandic works such as the *Poetic Edda* or Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*.<sup>1</sup> Among Heathens, the discussion around Loki has become contentious over recent years. Across various social platforms, in broader Heathen discussion and among various smaller communities, the problem of Loki appears, often as a divisive force.

Even The Troth, widely known as the largest inclusive Heathen organization, had, until 2019, banned the hailing of Loki at Troth events.<sup>2</sup> Hailing Loki's children, Fenrir and Jormungandr, was still seen as unacceptable even after this ban on Loki was overturned. This policy regarding Loki's spicy sons was not changed until June of 2023, and even then, the current policy simply leaves out previous mention. This controversy in Heathenry came to a head with respect to the Troth in 2013 when, despite policy, an unofficial blot / ritual was held to Loki in the after-hours of the event. This resulted in many from the Troth feeling that this ritual they did not see or hear had polluted their experience, and left the organization entirely.<sup>3</sup> Even after this incident, the Troth took six years to reverse the policy. An additional four years passed before the Troth removed language banning the hailing of Loki's controversial sons at Troth events.

The interpretation of Loki in academia has ranged from a chthonic mountain dwarf, a trickster, a God of Fire, a God of Darkness, to, plainly, Norse Myth's Satan. This wide variety of scholarly interpretations of a deity with a seemingly contradictory personality has extended into Heathenry. A general trend appeared among Heathen leadership that focused on negative interpretations of Loki, and extended negative associations to those who find themselves and their practice closely associated with Loki and/or his family. Heathenry has seen fit to create the word 'Lokean' to reference, both proudly and derogatorily, Heathens who have practice with Loki. This controversy is further evidenced by the fact the word 'Nokean' exists, which is the word Lokeans and others use to reference those who denigrate Lokeans or deny them a space to practice. Nokeans will typically use at least one of three arguments to deny Lokeans access to either community or at least expression of their worship within a community. These arguments are: (1) Loki is evil; (2) Loki contributes to moral decay; and (3) Loki was never worshipped in history.<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of these arguments in Heathenry has resulted in the ostracization of Lokeans from much of the broader Heathen community. Lokeans, in order to find community, must sometimes hide the fact that they worship a deity central to their hearth cult.<sup>5</sup> Within

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<sup>1</sup> Snorri's *Edda* is often called the *Prose Edda*.

<sup>2</sup> Waggoner, *Our Troth: Volume 2: Heathen Gods*, 349

<sup>3</sup> Grundy, Waggoner, *God in Flames*, xiv

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, ix. Ben Waggoner's forward to Grundy's *God in Flames* provides an analysis of each argument, why they are put forward, and examples of organizations and individuals who use these arguments.

<sup>5</sup> Collazo, Steinhauser, *Blood Unbound*, 14.

Heathen culture, no other deity, deity's family, or practice associated with them inspires this level of controversy and division.

Who is this figure that inspires so much discord among both academics and practitioners? Can there be a justified worship of Loki in modern practice? Was there ever a historical veneration of such a deity? Nothing seems clear about Loki, not his allegiance, his associations, or even his gender. Loki, interestingly, has a number of myths we can reference in order to learn more about him and his complex character. This wealth of myths has, to a degree, been a weakness rather than a strength in interpreting Loki. We do not get a simple picture of a consistent character through these myths. Instead, we get a complex character who can seem unpredictable and difficult for practitioners to defend, and yet his worship persists. We can divide them into myths in which he is seen as a negative figure, positive figure, and both a negative and positive figure.<sup>6</sup>

### **Myths of Loki as a Positive Figure:**

There are a number of myths in which Loki is a predominantly positive figure. The famous dynamic of Loki cleaning up his own messes are not present in these stories, and instead Loki is just another deity among the family of the Aesir, albeit an unorthodox one.

#### *Blood-Oath with Odin*

An especially interesting myth of Loki is one to which we do not have significant access. This would be the myth in which Loki and Odin "blended their blood together." What this blending of blood meant specifically for Odin and Loki is largely lost, but may have some similarity to the oath-brotherhood ritual sworn in *The Saga of Gisli Sursson*. The blood oath ritual that sets the stage for conflict in *Gisli's Saga* involves four men mixing their blood in the turf, swearing they would avenge one another as if they were brothers. This does not mean they are now a part of the same family, with inheritance and other functions, but seems to be focused on their loyalty to one another and their commitment to vengeance should wrongs befall one of them. Conflict arises when one of the blood brothers withdraws from the oath moments after it is made. A shadow comes over the brothers and conflict precipitates from there.<sup>7</sup> Some have taken this similarity to mean that the oath between Odin and Loki is an oath of 'blood brotherhood', but this may be an overstatement. We do not know the nature of the oath between Loki and Odin beyond what is stated, and brotherhood is not mentioned.

Loki made a reference to this ritual in the *Lokasenna*, which seems to have been performed by himself and Odin. The ritual involved what seems to have been a symbolic oath, saying that they would not imbibe in beer unless it was brought to both of them. Or, at least, Loki says that this oath was made by Odin. It is unknown if Loki made the same or similar oath, but it can be presumed that he did. Odin, in light of the reminder of this oath, invites Loki to sit and speak his words of blame.<sup>8</sup> Whatever myth

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<sup>6</sup> Shjodt, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Volume III, "Loki"*, 1251-1263 contains this delineation of Loki myths separated into these categories of positivity and negativity.

<sup>7</sup> Quinn and Regal, *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda, "Lokasenna / Loki's Quarrel 9-10"*, 82.

originated this oath between them likely puts Loki in a positive light. We do not, however, have access to this myth, as it was lost to time.

### *Thor in a Wedding Dress*

Another myth that not only shows Loki in a positive light but shows his cunning and intelligence is the story of retrieving Thor's hammer as told in the *Thrymskvida* (Thrym's Poem). This story is typically represented as a comedy, but has a number of interesting events, most famously the fact that Loki helped Thor disguise himself as Freyja in a ploy to retrieve his lost hammer. During this myth, Loki shapeshifted into a maiden and is referred to as a feminine character while in this form. Thor, however, retains his masculine kennings while in a wedding dress, and is referred to as the Husband of Sif. Thor retains his masculinity while Loki becomes feminine, despite both appearing and dressing as women.<sup>9</sup> With Loki's help, Thor regained his hammer and then proceeded to kill all the giants present in his usual way.

This myth best represents the friendship aspect of Thor and Loki's relationship. When Thor is missing his hammer, he goes to the cleverest one he knows, Loki. Others are recruited as part of the solution, but the one who sticks by his side and helps him through the end is Loki. It turns out that this clever God is the one who can be depended upon to come up with unorthodox solutions to fix an impossible problem. This is something he consistently does throughout myth. Thor's strength can be relied upon, but it cannot solve every problem. Sometimes, cunning is required.

### *Loki vs Logi*

There is also the story in Snorri's *Edda* in which Loki is again a companion of Thor in the land of the Jotunar. Here he stood against Utgarda-Loki's servant, Logi, in an eating competition. Thor and his friends, including Loki, failed to win their competitions against the Jotun, who generally represent unyielding forces of nature, including Logi (wildfire), Jormungandr, the ocean itself, old age, and thought. This was revealed to Thor by the end of the myth and Utgarda-Loki disappears. Loki remained committed to Thor's aid throughout their time in Utgarda-Loki's realm.

There remains the curious relationship between Loki and Utgarda-Loki with respect to the similarity of their name and their association with deception. It is, however, unknown if any relationship exists between the two. They do not recognize one another in the story, and Loki does not side with Utgarda-Loki at any point in the narrative.

### *Loki the Creator*

Finally, there is the curious possibility of Loki's association with the creation of humanity. The *Voluspa* contains an account of the creation of mankind by a trio of deities: Odin; Hoenir; and Lodurr. The same trio is spotted later in Snorri's *Edda* prior to the kidnapping of Idunn, except the trio is Odin,

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<sup>9</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, "Thrymskvida / Thrym's Poem 24, 26, and 28", 96.

Hoenir, and Loki. Loki has a number of kennings and names, including the name *Lopt*, which can be translated as *Skywalker*,<sup>10</sup> that show up throughout Eddic writing. These kennings and names are casually used to replace his name, as is often the case with Odin and Thor. *Lodurr* could easily be one of these names for Loki. Rudolf Simek points out that the strongest evidence for connecting *Lodur* and *Loki* is within the kennings for Odin, among which is “*Lopt’s friend*”, and *Lodurr* is referred to in an analogous position in relation to Odin in kennings.

*Lodurr* has been defended as being a fertility deity unto himself, unique and independent from any other deity. He certainly would not be the first deity to which we have scant mention and nothing more. Another interpretation of *Lodurr* is that he is identical to *Freyr*, another fertility deity that could fill the same role.<sup>11</sup> The identification of *Lodurr* as *Loki* is certainly interesting considering *Lodurr’s* part in the creation of mankind, which is the gift of blood, the warmth and vitality of life.<sup>12</sup> Academics and modern *Lokeans* alike have argued that this is a fit for *Loki*, whose humor and rebellious spirit certainly fits as the deity who gave humanity their warmth.

A further wrench is thrown into this dynamic if one takes the approach of simplifying the various trios involving Odin. There is Odin, *Hoenir*, and *Loki* at the introduction of the *Idunn* myth. There is Odin, *Vili*, and *Ve* in *Snorri’s* myth of the creation of mankind, and there is Odin, *Lodurr*, and *Heonir* in the *Voluspa’s* creation of mankind myth. *Snorri* quotes from the *Voluspa*, so he was likely aware of that trio, and yet represents those involved as “*Bor’s sons*” in his retelling.<sup>13</sup> If we agree that *Lodurr* and *Loki* are the same, it is possible that *Hoenir* and *Loki* are identical to *Vili* and *Ve*, at which point *Loki* would not only be involved with the creation of mankind, but would be Odin’s brother involved in the creation of *Midgard* and the slaying of *Ymir*, which would certainly explain some of the complication regarding *Loki’s* relationship with the rest of the Gods.

## Myths of *Loki* as a Negative Figure:

*Loki* appears in a number of myths where it can certainly be argued that he is a more negative than positive figure. I’ll briefly go over them here. However, some make a weaker case than others for a negative *Loki*, and I am compelled to give some commentary explaining why.

### *Thor vs Gerriod*

The first among these negative myths is the story of *Thor’s* battle with *Gerriod*, which begins with *Loki* baiting *Jotun* by flying into their realm with a falcon form as borrowed from *Freyja*. The *Jotun* were angered that *Loki* has appeared in their court. Their leader, *Gerriod*, ordered one of his minions to capture *Loki*. In a glorious representation of a medieval version of an internet troll, *Snorri* states that *Loki* intended to let the *Jotun* go through the entire process of climbing up into the rafters to retrieve him

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<sup>10</sup> Waggoner, *Our Troth: Volume 2: Heathen Gods*, 351.

<sup>11</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, “*Voluspa 18*”, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Snorri Sturluson*, *Faulkes, Edda*, 13

before just casually flying off. This backfires and Loki was captured and starved for three months before finally promising to bring an unarmed Thor back with him into Gerriod's court.

Convinced by Loki to come visit Gerriod, Thor stopped with Grid, the Jotun mother of Vidarr the Silent by Odin. Grid, knowing the treachery of Gerriod, equipped Thor with her own girdle of might, iron gauntlets, and her staff. Thor then entered the court of Gerriod accompanied by Loki, but Thor withstood the tricks employed by the Jotun in attempts to overwhelm his strength. Thor alone and without Mjolnir is still Thor. The Jotun host attempted to kill Thor by throwing a mass of molten iron at the God of Strength. Thor caught it with his borrowed iron gauntlets and hurled it back. Gerriod, who had hidden himself behind a pillar, was struck with the molten iron which went *through* the pillar and into him. This is, of course, after Thor broke the backs of Gerriod's daughters who had attempted to kill him by crushing him against the ceiling.

The accusation that this is a negative myth about Loki seems predicated on the idea that somehow Thor cannot take care of himself. Loki had found himself in a bind, caught between the dishonor of breaking his word and the dishonor of manipulating Thor. He sided with his word, as is consistently the case with Loki. It seems that Loki put his faith in Thor's ability to overcome the challenge and accompanied him throughout the process. Loki never protected Thor in this story because he lacked the opportunity to do so. Thor overwhelmed his opponents in both of the two versions of this story preserved by Snorri. Further, the concept of Loki luring Thor unarmed into Gerriod's court is only supported by Snorri's personal summary of the myth. In the *Thorsdrapa*, Thor simply had his hammer and used it to defeat Gerriod and his minions.<sup>14</sup> This would suggest that Loki, intentionally or not, may have forgotten to mention that Thor needs to show up without Mjolnir, or that Thor ignored that part of the request. The summary of this myth seems to be less one in which Loki tricks Thor, but rather one in which Thor saves Loki.

A third version of this legend is recorded by Saxo Grammaticus, in which a group of explorers found the aftermath of Gerriod's destruction. Thorkil, aware of the legends of Thor, taught the group that Thor had driven a molten ingot into the vitals of Gerriod and had killed his daughters with thunderbolts, suggesting that Thor had his hammer throughout this ordeal. In this version, Loki is not mentioned at all, nor is the promise of Thor arriving unarmed. What is preserved is the fact that Thor overwhelmingly defeated the court of Gerriod. As we can see, Loki's contribution to this myth varies between each telling. Therefore, it is difficult to establish a negative presence of Loki as authentic, or even beyond Snorri's imagination.

### *Loki Hates Goats*

The next example of a negative myth suggests that Loki is responsible for the maiming of Thor's goats. This accusation exists without context in *Hymiskvida*, which is another story that may have historically been a Thor and Loki companionship adventure, but it exists now as a Thor and Tyr companionship adventure. At the end, Thor's goat collapses, half dead, and credit to this event is given

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<sup>14</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 81-86. This is where Snorri's summary and the *Thorsdrapa* is located in the Edda. The second to last stanza of the *Thorsdrapa* attests that Thor destroys the Jotun "with bloody hammer".

to Loki.<sup>15</sup> The motivation for this may be that earlier in the poem, Thor kills (or at least strikes) Jormungandr, Loki's son. This would make the action an understated but justified act of vengeance, especially appropriate if Jormungandr is simply maimed rather than killed.

However, this is all put into question by Snorri's telling of the myth, in which Loki accompanies Thor, but the one responsible for the maiming of the goat is not Loki but the peasant boy Thjalfi. Thor kills his goats and cooks them for a peasant family and lays out the skins, telling the family to throw the bones onto them. His intention is to then take the skins, wrap them up, and then revive his goats by blessing them with his hammer. The result is a limping goat, explained by the fact that Thjalfi had cracked open a bone to suck out the marrow, compromising the magic.<sup>16</sup> Loki seems unrelated to the event in this story, which seems to be referencing the same incident as the *Hymiskvida*. The Danish film *Valhalla: The Legend of Thor* (2019) provides an elegant solution to this discrepancy by depicting Loki advising Thjalfi to crack the bones and eat the marrow, but this is not represented in the written sources.

### *The Death of Baldr*

The most famous of the negative depictions of Loki is the death of Baldr myth as told by Snorri Sturluson and possibly referenced in the *Lokasenna*. This myth is one of the most discussed in the academic history of Norse mythology and seems to be a pivotal event in the broad mythological timeline. The portions which concern Loki happen after Baldr appears to have been made invincible. The Gods were taking great joy in the game of throwing all kinds of objects, including weapons, at Baldr and watching them simply bounce right off. Loki disguised himself as a maiden and learned from Frigg that she had made every item in the universe promise to never harm Baldr. Frigg also explained to the maiden that she had not made mistletoe swear the oath because it was too young.

Loki, no longer in disguise, took advantage of this information and went to pluck from the mistletoe. And then, in his infinite wisdom, somehow managed to make a sharpened weapon out of mistletoe. He then found The Blind God, Hodr, and convinced him to join in on the fun. He directed Hodr to Baldr, pointed him in the right direction, handed him the mistletoe, and then Hodr joined in on the game. However, the mistletoe was Baldr's single weakness in this state, and the mistletoe missile killed Baldr there on the spot. This moment paralysed Asgard as a legal quandary has now appeared: A son of Odin had killed a son of Odin in a place of frith, a sacred place of peace, and as such, no one could take vengeance. The Gods could do nothing but weep.

It is after this that the funeral of Baldr takes place, and the rider Hermodr was sent to Hel to broker for Baldr's revival. Hel, the Goddess of Death and the daughter of Loki, informed Hermodr that if all things in the universe weep, then Baldr could yet live again. The Aesir immediately take action, and sent riders out with requests. Everyone and everything in the universe wept, with the exception of a Jotun named Thokk, said by Snorri to be Loki in disguise, who refused to weep. She sat in a cave, and when she was requested to weep for Baldr, she responded, "Thokk will weep dry tears for Baldr's burial. No good got I from the old one's son either dead or alive. Let Hel hold what she has."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, "Hymiskvida / Hymir's Poem 37", 79

<sup>16</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 37-38.

<sup>17</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 48-51 contains the story of the death of Baldr.

The Death of Baldr narrative is told differently by Saxo Grammaticus, the Danish historian writing around the same time as Snorri Sturluson. His euhemerist narrative is far more detailed. He casts Hodr as the protagonist and Baldr as the villain. This version depicts them as Danish warlords fighting over land and Nanna. Who, interestingly, is depicted by Snorri as Baldr's doting wife. In Saxo's narrative, however, she refused Baldr, and was committed to Hodr. Loki is not mentioned at all. Hodr instead received advice on how to kill Baldr from magical forest maidens, who also supplied him with equipment.<sup>18</sup> This complicates matters as the story is not without its parallels in Icelandic Myth, as Vali took vengeance on Hodr for the death of Baldr, not Loki. In the *Voluspa*, it is said that Vali "never washed his hands nor combed his hair, until he brought Baldr's adversary to the funeral pyre."<sup>19</sup> In Saxo's narrative, Bo, his version of Vali, entered a duel with Hodr and kills him, but suffered mortal wounds himself and died shortly thereafter.

Loki's responsibility for the death of Baldr is thus put in question based on the varying stories. However, the *Lokasenna* seems to make reference to this event. While speaking in conflict with Frigg, Loki drops, "for I brought it about that you will never again see Baldr ride to the halls."<sup>20</sup> Now this could be a reference to Loki's part in the death of Baldr, or it could easily be a reference to his refusal to weep for Baldr. Either way, the *Lokasenna* implies that Loki bears some responsibility related to the death of Baldr, either for the death itself, or for keeping him dead.

Now the question remains as to whether or not this is actually a negative. Loki, as we'll see in future myths, seems to be strongly associated with balance. It is entirely possible that Loki's motivation was offense at the imbalance created by Baldr's invulnerability. We do not, however, have access to Loki's motivation, and this is assuming, of course, that any "pagan version" of the myth included Loki at all.

### *Loki Talks Shit*

This leads us into the *Lokasenna* itself, which has been referenced a number of times already. The basic structure of the myth is that Loki gets involved in a war of words with most of the Aesir. The introduction to the myth has what is probably the most clearly negative action of Loki, which is when praise is given to Aegir's servants, he kills one named Fimafeng. Fimafeng's addition to the myths appears to be very late, as he is only mentioned in the *Lokasenna* and nowhere else.<sup>21</sup> The lateness of this addition to Loki's character inspires questions as to its authenticity. It's hard to justify that such an action by Loki would have contributed to a historically negative view of the deity if the victim of his crime is a deity that did not appear in the mythology until long after the practice of Heathenry had been nominally banned from public life.

The *Lokasenna* continues after this preamble and Loki approaches the hall in which the Gods are celebrating. He debates his entry with Eldir, who stands at the door. Upon entry, Loki convinces Odin that he is oathbound to hear him out. Odin allows Loki to sit, drink, and speak his "words of blame" to the

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<sup>18</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, Fisher, and Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus : The History of the Danes : Books I-IX*, "Book III", 69-79 contains Saxo's telling of the Baldr narrative.

<sup>19</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, "Voluspa 34", 8.

<sup>20</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, "Lokasenna / Loki's Quarrel 28", 85.

<sup>21</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 82-83.

Gods. What follows is a war of words with the Gods. Odin and Loki call each other perverts, the details of their insults cause us reading later to associate them both with Seidr. Bragi is accused of cowardice. Loki accuses a variety of Goddesses of infidelity, including Sif and Idunn. He also weirdly accuses Njordr of having been used as a pisspot by the daughters of Hymir. Some of these accusations have references elsewhere in myth, some do not. Confirmation remains to be found on Njordr's status as a toilet.

Odin's accusation against Loki furthers the complexity around Loki in regards to gender and sexuality. Certainly, going to the underworld and getting impregnated as a cow likely deviated from the cultural norms of medieval Scandinavia. Loki's insult back to Odin may be an attempt to bring him off his high horse, showing that he too deviated from the cultural norms of the day. This seems to be the case for much of the *Lokasenna*. The Gods attempt to engage with Loki, but Loki knows their secrets, and makes the point that none of them are any better than he. The Gods all have their own negative associations, and Loki holds them to account. Is he perfect? No. But he never claims so. Is this really a negative myth, or is this just a myth where Loki's honesty is impolite? Truly, the *Lokasenna* is a boon to Loceans, as it secures Loki's place as a rebellious truth-teller, and reveals that any point made against Loki has a counterpoint among the rest of the Gods. Has Loki made mistakes? Sure, but this does not make him unique.

The *Lokasenna* finally ends at the appearance of Thor who threatens Loki with his hammer if he does not quit his performance. Loki responds that for Thor, he will leave, if for no other reason than he knows that Thor will deliver on his threats, implying that the other Gods would not be so bold. After he leaves, the Gods chase him down and punish him. His famous binding is represented here as punishment for his words in the *Lokasenna*<sup>22</sup> rather than the death of Baldr as Snorri states.<sup>23</sup> Even Loki's punishment seems to be a place of inconsistency. Though they disagree on the reason, the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Edda* both describe a similar scene. Loki's sons are disemboweled and Loki is bound with their guts. Skadi places a poisonous snake over him. Sigyn, Loki's wife, stands next to him with a basin to collect the poison that drips onto him. When the basin fills and she must go to empty it, the poison drips onto Loki directly and he writhes in pain, causing earthquakes.

### *Saxo's Bound Utgarda-Loki*

This leads into another legend which *could*, maybe, be about Loki. Saxo Grammaticus seems to omit Loki from his mythic narratives, which raises questions around the authenticity of Loki in the first place. Explanations have been offered, suggesting that Saxo's agenda of demonizing the Gods leaves little room for Loki, at least given his place in some narratives such as the death of Baldr.<sup>24</sup> An antagonist among the Gods suddenly becomes a protagonist in Saxo's telling, as evidenced by his sympathetic depiction of Hodr. Unfortunately, Saxo never tries his hand at a sympathetic Loki, but he does represent *something* that may or may not be Loki in Book VIII of his narrative.

Saxo covers a story involving two journeys into what seems to be the underworld. They contain hallmarks of otherworldly adventure, and give a sense of a demon-infested labyrinthine world

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<sup>22</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, "Lokasenna / Loki's Quarrel", 92.

<sup>23</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 51-52.

<sup>24</sup> Schjodt, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Volume III*, "Loki", 1255.



reminiscent of Blizzard's *Diablo*. The expeditions are led by learned adventurer Thorkil, mentioned above in relation to his knowledge of the Gerriod legend. The expeditions themselves take some horrific turns, and many of the men on the adventure meet the end of their lives in ways that call to mind the 80s slasher genre. The inspiration for the second expedition is that King Gorm,<sup>25</sup> in his old age, wanted to understand what his afterlife might be as a worshipper of Utgarda-Loki. Gorm had made an offering to Utgarda-Loki for a safe return home on the first expedition, and Utgarda-Loki had granted good weather, securing safe passage. Thorkil is compelled to go on a second journey to this haunted realm with another group of men, many of which will be led to their doom.

In the depths of caves beneath the earth, they come across the bound figure of Utgarda-Loki, a huge creature draped in fetters. He is kept in a repulsive chamber crawling with snakes. Saxo describes his "rank-smelling hairs" that were "as long and tough as spears of cornel wood."<sup>26</sup> Thorkil takes one of these hairs with him as proof he had completed the journey. Immediately a powerful stench covers the room and snakes leap from the walls firing venom. The Vikings would raise their shields and rush to the exit, but the demonic snakes would fly over them and spit their venom from above, killing many of the men. Only five men would escape the caves and embark with Thorkil for the journey home. Of those, three would die on the journey home from the effects of the poisonous gas.

Saxo takes this moment to turn Thorkil into a proto-Christian of sorts, saying that while the other men prayed to their idols, Thorkil reached out to the "God of the Universe" for calm weather, pouring libations during his prayers. His petition would be answered, just as Gorm's was when he prayed to Utgarda-Loki. Thorkil would finally make it home, but when Gorm discovered the nature of his account, he sought to have Thorkil assassinated before he could be readily informed. Thorkil learned of this and left his bed early in the morning, replacing his body with a log. The King's men would attack a log in a bed instead of the wise Thorkil. Rather than take his revenge, Thorkil appeared before the king and simply spoke that he would pass on his duty of revenge and just tell the king what he found, which was that he had been worshipping a horrid beast. During Thorkil's telling of this story, Gorm fell dead from the descriptions alone. Thorkil, to erase any doubt of his words, produced the foul-smelling hair he had taken as proof. The hair released its poison in the hall, causing the death of several bystanders.<sup>27</sup>

This legend is certainly curious, and may or may not be about Loki. Utgarda-Loki appears in Snorri's narrative as a character distinct from Loki himself. Loki is even present and aids Thor against Utgarda-Loki. It's possible that Utgarda-Loki and Loki were at some point the same entity, but eventually split off, creating distinct personalities in myth. Utgarda-Loki's name means "Loki of the Outer World" and could make reference to some sort of "Mirror world" version of Loki who is far more malicious. Perhaps there is an unknown legend of Utgarda-Loki's origin that is somehow caused by Loki, likely by accident. Curiously, this could also mean that the Loki who is bound is not Loki but Utgarda-Loki. Saxo's reference to Utgarda-Loki is also curious, because the existence of an outer-world Loki implies the existence of a "non-outer-world Loki". This would mean that even though Saxo never mentions Loki, he certainly implies his existence.

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<sup>25</sup> The King Gorm in this narrative is not Gorm the Old, but may have been a reference to him.

<sup>26</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, Fisher, and Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus : The History of the Danes : Books I-IX, "Book VIII"*, 269.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 270.

This legend from Saxo is sometimes used as evidence that the worship of Loki is a negative, as the true nature of Loki, even if he answers prayers, is that of a horrifying beast. However, this is taking at face value the narrative of Saxo Grammaticus, a man who depicts Odin as an amoral manipulative wizard, Baldr as an arrogant man-child and a jealous lover, and Thor as a brute who looks down on humanity. Saxo's narratives, therefore, are worth a critical reading. It's safe to say that any Heathen reading Saxo should probably not take his accounts at face value, as his bias is overt. His agenda was very obviously to preserve Danish traditional stories and history while shaming its pagan past.

### *Father of Monsters*

Another aspect of Loki typically tossed into the negative is that he is the father of monsters. This assignment is generally given to him through the children that he has with Angrboda, whose name means 'the one who brings grief'<sup>28</sup> and is likewise often referred to as the mother of monsters. The offspring of Loki and Angrboda are Jormungandr, the Midgard Serpent, Hel, the Goddess of Death, and Fenrir, the world-ending wolf who is destined to kill Odin (and perhaps Tyr). The worship of these three deities, as well as their mother, have created a similar amount of controversy as Loki himself. The implication of this as a negative aspect of Loki is predicated on the nature of the parents determining the nature of the children. Snorri states that the children are of concern due to the nature of their mother, and still more because of the nature of their father.<sup>29</sup>

There are problems with this line of thinking. Firstly, Hel does not seem to create any threat in the remainder of the narrative beyond the domain she is assigned by Odin as the Goddess of Death. Her part in the Baldr narrative expresses her dominion over the finality of death, not the act of death. She is reasonable and even gracious in providing a possibility in overriding Baldr's death. Jormungandr is attacked by Thor before his culmination at Ragnarok, in which they kill each other. Fenrir is arguably wronged by the Gods simply for being a large wolf before he breaks loose and takes his revenge. This dynamic is not missed by modern practitioners who might understand Jormungandr as a force of nature who responds to aggression from humanity (or its protector in Thor). They might see Hel as a death matron, more of a maternal guardian and caretaker of the ancestral dead than any sort of evil force. They might see a little of themselves in Fenrir, an entity who is harshly judged and punished for his identity. They might identify with his struggle and even have understanding for his desire for revenge. If Jormungandr, Hel, and Fenrir are meant to reflect the nature of their parents, then perhaps we should give Loki and Angrboda a closer look. In fact, understanding the justifiable rage felt by their children may give context to Loki and Angrboda.

An interesting analogue for Angrboda might be found in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* in the form of Bera, the mother of three children by their father, Bjorn, who is cursed as a werebear. Bera is also cursed by the same woman who cursed and arranged the death of Bjorn by feeding Bera the cooked bear meat of her deceased lover. Because of this secondary curse, two of Bera's children had deformities, but because the curse wasn't properly completed, the third, Bodvar, was unaffected by the curse. Despite the effects of the spell cast on Bera, all three of these children, Elk-Frodi (who was half elk), Thorir Houndfoot (who had the feet of a hound), and Bodvar Bjarki (A legendary warrior with a

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<sup>28</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 27.

spirit bear form) all have heroic adventures.<sup>30</sup> Bera is the mother of monsters, and those monsters share the nature of their father and mother, and they are heroes.

### *Ragnarok*

Finally, there is Loki's representation in Ragnarok. In the myths themselves, much of the cataclysmic destruction in Ragnarok is not the cause of Loki but rather Fenrir and Surtr. Loki is present but as part of a series of duels between rival deities. Fenrir defeats Odin, who is in turn defeated by Vidarr. Thor and Jormungandr defeat each other. Surtr defeats Freyr. Garm (possibly also Fenrir) and Tyr defeat each other. Loki and Heimdallr defeat each other.<sup>31</sup> Loki is obviously on the side of this fight that does not involve the Aesir, and he is the only deity counted among the Aesir who fights against them. It may be understandable that Loki would fight on the same side as two of his children, Fenrir and Jormungandr (Hel is absent). Snorri says that Loki arrives with "Hel's own," suggesting an army of the dead, but in the *Voluspa*, he arrives with the Sons of Muspel.<sup>32</sup>

E. O. G. Turville-Petre, a scholar of skaldic poetry, remarks that the Ragnarok legend seems to be a combination of Christian and Pagan legends. He notes that the destruction of the world by fire seems to have Christian influences, while the earth sinking into the sea has some Celtic inspiration. Fenrir's consumption of the sun may be pagan, while the falling of the stars could be Christian. Christian influence can be seen in the decline of morals and the breaking of the bonds of kinship as part of the leadup to the end of the world. Fenrir's association with a fall of society is referenced in the *Hakonarmal* as well as the *Eiriksmal*, but this Fenrir does not seem to be bound as is the Eddic Fenrir. The Ragnarok legend seems to be a Frankenstein's monster of legends, both Christian and Pagan, that formed the *Voluspa* and related legends.<sup>33</sup>

Part of this combination of legends seems to be a series of rivalries that we find elsewhere in myth, especially that of Thor and Jormungandr and that of Loki and Heimdallr. Thor and Jormungandr's rivalry are referenced several times throughout Snorri's *Edda* as he quotes other skaldic poets. The rivalry between Loki and Heimdallr is referenced briefly in the available fragments of Ulf Uggason's *Husdrapa* as preserved by Snorri. In this rivalry, they are described as in contest over the "sea-kidney" which is likely Brisingamen, Freyja's necklace.<sup>34</sup> These and other rivalries (Freyr and Surtr, Tyr and Garm/Fenrir) were likely combined into the Ragnarok legend as we know it, which exists as a product of Christianization. Whatever "pagan version" of this myth that exists lies in fragments scattered across other poetic works, *none of which mention Loki*.

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<sup>30</sup> Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 35-41.

<sup>31</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 54-55 lists out the duels of Ragnarok.

<sup>32</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, "Voluspa 48", 10.

<sup>33</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 281-285.

<sup>34</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 77.

## Myths of Loki as a Positive and Negative Figure:

There are a number of myths involving Loki that cannot be clearly categorized in a positive or negative light, even at a surface level glance. Loki's complexity gets even more frustrating with legends in which he seems to be both the hero and the villain. This is reflected best in four major myths.

### *Making Asgard Great Again*

When the Gods first constructed Midgard and began their settlement of Asgard, it was decided that they needed to build a wall. A builder offered to construct them such a fortress that it would withstand frost giants and all manner of threats. The payment he requested was a marriage to Freyja and to have possession of the sun and the moon if he could complete the project in three seasons on his own; otherwise, there would be no payment. The Gods, thinking this feat was impossible, held a meeting. The Gods struck a bargain with the builder that he could have what he demanded, but only if he was able to complete the project in a single winter, but that he should receive help from no man. The builder countered that he would like the use of his steed. Loki, presumably seeing that this was in keeping with the wording of the deal, suggested that this be allowed.

Turns out, this builder's stallion was insanely strong, and performed twice the deeds of strength as the builder. It looked like the master builder was about to actually successfully pull this off, and the Gods would have to deliver on their promised payment. Weirdly enough, it was Loki who is villainized for this rather than the Gods for seeking to get free labor. Whatever the case, Freyja was not happy, and the Gods put it on Loki to solve the issue, otherwise they would kill him. Loki created a solution by turning himself into a curvy sexy mare and luring the stallion away from the jobsite. The builder ran off trying to catch his stallion, but the stallion had other, far more pressing interests. The next day, not as much building was done, and it became clear that the builder would be unable to complete the task.

The builder went into a rage and it was revealed that he was actually a mountain giant. The Gods canceled their oaths and called upon Thor, who came rolling in with Mjolnir and, in the words of Snorri, paid the Giant's wages by smashing his skull with Mjolnir and then laying him to rest in Niflhel. After this, Loki returned with his new child, a foal, Sleipnir, making Loki the proud mother of an eight-legged horse.<sup>35</sup>

This story reads as if the Gods are trying to wiggle out of their responsibilities, but Loki is the one who solves the problems and comes back with an eight-legged horse as a gift for Odin. This legend may have been subject to aspects of Christianization, but the spirit of Loki's motherhood to Sleipnir fits his character.<sup>36</sup> The Gods come out of this story looking more negative than Loki, but this could also be an aspect of this process of Christianization. Anyone who has worked construction and dealt with a client who wants to get out of payment likely won't view this legend with the Gods in a positive light. Loki's solution, however, is both fair and underhanded. It fits the term of the bet, but isn't exactly the most honest way of going about achieving victory. Loki is known to bend the rules but keep to his word, and in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Schjodt, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Volume III, "Loki"*, 1260.

this case, it works out to the favor of the Gods. The wall was built, and the Jotun paid for it. And Odin got a horse out of the whole situation.

### *Tragedy of Otter*

The trend of “Loki gets the Gods into a situation and then gets them out of it” continues with this legend of Loki and Otter. Odin, Loki, and Hoenir are out and about, chillin’, and Loki finds an otter eating a salmon. Loki throws a stone, killing the otter. Loki was quite pleased. With one throw, he caught both an otter and a salmon. The trio then went to visit a farmer, and come to find out, the otter was the farmer’s son. The identity of the otter and the fact that Loki had killed him was revealed, and the three deities were taken prisoner by the farmer and his other sons. The Aesir offered a ransom for their lives. The terms decided upon were that the sum should be enough gold to both fill and cover the otter-skin from the farmer’s deceased son.

Odin sent Loki out to handle the task. Loki found a dwarf in the form of a salmon, captured him, and ransomed his life for all the gold he has in his cave. The dwarf agreed and took a substantial amount of wealth out of the cave, but tried to hide a gold ring up his arm. Loki, a crafty one himself, noticed this and demanded the ring as well. The dwarf went along with it, but cursed the ring to bring misfortune on its possessor. Once Loki returned, they filled and covered the otter-skin with gold. Odin liked the ring and took it for himself in the process of payment, but Otter’s father noticed that a whisker was not yet covered, and so Odin covered it with the ring. After this, the debt was considered fulfilled, and the farmer kept a cursed ring. If Odin had made excuses to keep the ring, he would have also inherited the curse.<sup>37</sup>

Assigning negative properties to this myth with respect to Loki seems strange, as this is a situation in which Loki accidentally creates a problem, and then solves the problem largely of his own volition. A criticism of Loki is often that his livelihood is threatened before he solves a problem. This too is a situation in which it is life or death for Loki, but the threat is not only on him, but on others as well. Loki takes responsibility for an action that unintentionally created a problem, and comes up with the solution. One could easily argue that his solution was not exactly ethical, considering that he imprisoned and ransomed the wealth of a dwarf. This would be a reasonable criticism, but Loki would hardly be an exception among the Gods for this kind of deed.

### *Sif’s Bad Hair Day*

Unfortunately, the only legend in which Sif plays a major part is a legend in which she is subjected to a practical joke from Loki. Sif was known for her long, beautiful hair. Loki, in a prank that would only be considered appropriate by certain prankster Youtubers, decides to shave her head. Thor, not a fan of the “it’s a prank bro” justification, threatened to break every bone in Loki’s body unless he swore to fix the issue. Loki’s solution in order to make things right is to commission the dwarves Brokk and Eitri to create a head of hair for Sif. They did so. Problem solved.

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<sup>37</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Faulkes, *Edda*, 99-100.

The dwarven brothers also created the ship Skidbladnir, and the spear Gungnir. Loki decided to take this whole situation a bit further and bet the dwarves his head that they could not make three more items as amazing as these. The dwarves set about with the attempt to outdo themselves, and Loki harassed them a bit in an attempt to win the wager. He utilized his power as a shapeshifter to bite one of the dwarves as a fly while he was working the bellows. Out of this round came Mjolnir, Gullinbursti, and Draupnir. The golden hair for Sif would indeed be a solution to the prank gone wrong. The dwarven creation grafted onto her scalp and would continue to grow as gold from her head. Ultimately, when the other items were presented to the Gods, Mjolnir, which was from the second round of creations, was deemed the best of the gifts.

This resulted in Loki losing the bet, but when the dwarves decided to make good on their wager, Loki added the stipulation that they had to catch him. Thor handled this part and brought Loki back to the dwarves. Loki said they could have his head and not his neck, ensuring that it would remain attached to his body. The dwarves then decided to sew Loki's mouth shut instead. Another solution would have been to cut off his head at the jaw, but that's not how the story goes.<sup>38</sup>

The assignment of negativity to Loki here is somewhat understandable. Certainly, the prank on Sif is inappropriate. But, it is hard not to recognize that Sif and the other Gods comes out ahead in this legend. This is another case where Loki creates a problem but then solves the problem. In this case, Loki creates a solution simply by making a request. The situation only gets complicated when he bets his head that the dwarves cannot outdo themselves. Loki is guilty of making a bad bet and then getting held to account by Thor. It is also worth pointing out that this is the legend in which we find the origination of Mjolnir. So, the very existence of Thor's famous hammer is owed to Loki.

#### *Curious Apples and Shifting Nuts: The Kidnapping of Idunn*

This myth starts with Odin, Hoenir, and Loki out on a journey together. They find a valley of oxen, kill one, and proceed to cook the animal. They find, however, that the ox refuses to actually cook. An eagle sitting above claims responsibility for this anomaly and says that if he gets his fill of the ox, then he'll allow the oven to work. The three Gods agree to this and allow the eagle to have its fill. The eagle immediately takes two hams and both shoulders of the ox. Loki doesn't appreciate this and hits the eagle with a pole.

Even though the eagle was promised to eat his fill, it seems that he takes all the best parts in the process. This is something that Loki may have seen as an abuse of the deal. Interestingly, smacking the eagle doesn't actually violate the oath, as the eagle still ate his fill. Loki demonstrates throughout the myths that he is a deity who appreciates the specificity of oaths and deals, be that when he makes them or when they are made with him. Even still, this is where Loki creates a problem that he has to figure out how to solve.

The eagle decides to fly off, taking the pole and Loki with him. The eagle made Loki's time in the air very inconvenient, banging him into stones and dragging him through trees. Loki offered a truce to the eagle where they could work out a deal. The eagle agreed that he would stop if Loki would lure Idunn out from the protective walls of Asgard with her apples. Loki is forced to agree and delivers on his

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 96-97.

promise, luring Idunn out with descriptions of interesting apples that she would probably think are worth having. He says that she should bring her apples for comparison, and she excitedly goes with him on this adventure. She was likely rather upset when instead she was met with the Jotun, Thjazi, the true identity of the eagle. Thjazi would then snatch Idunn away to his home.

Unfortunately, Idunn's absence meant that the Gods lost their agelessness and began to grow old (what this means for Odin's depiction as an older man is unknown). The Gods held Loki to account and the Gods threatened him with death and torture if he did not fix the situation, and so Loki (deep breath) figured out a solution. He asked to borrow Freyja's falcon form and went to fetch Idunn. He found her alone, chillin, in Thjazi's abode. Thjazi was out on a boat, so the timing was good. Loki turned Idunn into a nut and brought her home. Thjazi returned home and was most displeased with the fact that Idunn was missing and chased Loki in his eagle form.

The Gods saw Loki's precarious situation and sprang to action, constructing a pyre. Loki anticipated the solution and used his superior mobility as a falcon to fly close to the fire and dodge at the last moment. Thjazi's eagle form was unable to avoid the flames, and his wings caught fire. This resulted in Thjazi crashing into Asgard in flame and glory. The Aesir nearby would kill Thjazi, and thus Loki solved the problem he created.

Shortly thereafter, however, a new problem arose from this drama, as Thjazi's daughter, Skadi, arrived in full armor seeking revenge. The Gods decided to fix this problem by promising Skadi a husband among the Gods, but she had to choose her husband by the appearance of their feet. For whatever reason, Skadi accepts this proposition and picks the best damn feet she can find, which happen to be Njordr, rather than Baldr like she had hoped. Skadi's terms also included that the Gods had to make her laugh. The solution for this was left to none other than Loki, who strapped his testicles to a goat and struggled to get away, both he and the goat made quite a bit of hilarious noises in the process. After a few moments of this, Loki flopped into Skadi's lap, causing her to laugh. Finally, Odin put Thjazi's eyes into the sky as stars in compensation.<sup>39</sup>

This is a situation in which Loki created a problem that compounded on itself. Idunn's absence created a problem beyond the peril of only Idunn. After he is held to account, Loki enlists favors from the Gods in order to create a solution and is then instrumental in bringing about the solution. We also see another example of Loki's shapeshifting abilities working on others around him. The same powers of shapeshifting used on Idunn to turn her into a nut may have been used on Thor in the bridal disguise situation. Further, he aids in the solution of secondary problems created by his actions as well. Because of Loki, Skadi joins the Gods. Though she, perhaps reasonably, held on to a grudge, as she is the one who places the venomous snake over Loki's head in both the *Lokasenna* and Snorri's *Edda*.

A consistent theme throughout these myths is Loki's respect for his word. Loki makes promises and then delivers on them. He likewise holds others to their word with him. Others seem to be aware of this aspect about him and take advantage of it. Thjazi, Gerriod, and others who force Loki into unfortunate situations by forcing him to make a promise are exploiting loyalty to his word, and creating situations in which they can extract promises out of him. The ending of the *Lokasenna* is arguably the Gods breaking a promise to Loki in which Odin grants him permission to speak his words of blame. Though after Loki delivers on his end, the Gods are upset, and violate their oath by punishing him. Loki, a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 59-61.

deity who takes his word seriously, would no doubt be offended by this, which may explain his place in Ragnarok.

## Is Loki the Devil?

Loki, and indeed Lokeans, will sometimes receive within the Heathen community a response that is similar to that of Satan and Satanists among Christians, though the dynamic is much different. Lokeans, for one, believe in the existence of Loki and worship him as an external force, whereas Satanists are largely atheistic and do not share this view of Satan, instead viewing him as an avatar for the rebellious self and individual freedoms. A similarity in the dynamic is that both seem to have been adopted to represent social fringes, and the aid of a confidence within those social fringes in response to oppressive attitudes of the majority. An interesting difference is that Lokeans are still Heathens, whereas Satanists would not consider themselves Christians.

Parallels still exist between Loki and Satan that are undeniable. Both are rebels who fight against their former allies at the end of the world, both are fettered until the end of the world, both have traditions of fathering monsters, both are depicted as residing in a sort of hell. What are to be made of these commonalities? Some take these similarities to mean that we should view Loki as a Norse Satan, an evil force that is to be avoided.

This similarity is substantially explored in Anna Birgitta Rooth's *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology* in her search for an authentic Loki. While her conclusion of Loki as a spider deity never took hold within academia, some of her observations regarding the evolution of the character of Loki are worth further discussion, especially within the context of the view of Loki in modern worship. It seems likely that Loki is a major victim of the Christianization process of Norse Myth. The parallels between Loki and the devil may be inherited aspects of his character rather than authentic to a pagan image of Loki.

The most direct evidence of the Christianization process of Loki, according to Rooth, is represented in Saxo's narrative regarding Thorkil and the bound Utgarda-Loki. Whether or not Saxo meant to represent Loki or Utgarda-Loki is unknown; however, the placement of the Lokean bound figure in a Hellish landscape cannot be overlooked. Saxo's Christian agenda of demonizing the Gods may have taken effect here, importing the fettered devil from Revelation<sup>40</sup> and placing him within the narrative of a king and his misplaced worship of a horror. Thorkil converts to Christianity upon seeing for himself the true nature of pagan worship, whereas the pagan king dies, and is presumably sent to Hell for his worship of the devil known as Utgarda-Loki.<sup>41</sup> In fact, strangely, this argument is sometimes replicated by modern Heathens as evidence *against* Loki worship.

This isn't the first time in his text that Saxo demonizes the Gods. He spends a significant amount of time in the first book of his narrative discussing how the Gods are actually just wizards and that ancient peoples, including the Romans, were fools for having worshipped such entities.<sup>42</sup> He takes

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<sup>40</sup> Revelation 20:1-3 NRSV.

<sup>41</sup> Rooth, *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology*, 81-82.

<sup>42</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, Fisher, Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus : The History of the Danes : Books I-IX*, "Book I", 19-20, 25, 26 are quick examples of Saxo setting the tone regarding his perspective on pagan worship. For Saxo, all pagan worship is folly, not just that of Utgarda-Loki.



several opportunities to demonize the Gods, framing them in the worst light possible: Thor is a brute and a henchman of the Gods; Odin is an amoral deviant; Frigg is entitled, promiscuous, and disloyal; and Baldr is arrogant and jealous. If modern Heathens are to rest their case for the negative aspects of Loki worship on the commentary of Saxo Grammaticus, it seems to be an argument so overtly in bad faith that it can be dismissed out of hand.

For Saxo, there was no permissible pagan worship. All of it was folly or gullibility resulting from manipulative wizard-men. The reason why the worship of Utgarda-Loki is presented as a folly is because it's pagan, not because it's Utgarda-Loki, or regular inner world Loki for that matter. Those utilizing Saxo's story here as an argument against Loki worship would be missing that Saxo is contrasting it with the newfound Christian faith of Thorkil, who is meant to be presented as an early Christian in Heathen lands revealing the haunting reality of pagan worship, even though their prayers may be answered. The story is ultimately Christian propaganda, and reveals little, if anything, about the nature of Loki himself.

In fact, the conception of the bound figure may itself be a point of Christian influence. The same passage in Revelation raises questions about the binding of Fenrir. Snorri's story of the binding of Fenrir, while referenced in the *Lokasenna*, seems to be a late development and may not be authentic as a pagan myth. Rudolf Simek states in his *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* that while the sword in Fenrir's mouth seems to be from older sources, it appears that Snorri took a myth of Tyr losing his hand and combined it with another myth or folktale in order to make the binding of Fenrir.<sup>43</sup> As already mentioned, the *Hakonarmal*<sup>44</sup> and *Eiriksmal* each reference an unfettered Fenrir. The *Eiriksmal*, especially, suggests that the wolf is waiting for an opportunity to attack at any moment. It's possible that these binding legends may all be artifacts of Christianization. This Christianization process seems to have, consciously or unconsciously, selected certain entities for extreme demonization and put them through stories to create parallels with the Christian Satan.

Rooth's notes in her search for an authentic pagan Loki that this dynamic may have overwhelmingly affected Loki. She traces aspects of the evil Loki to foreign influences— many of which Christian— including the conception of Loki as the father of monsters, which she associates with the medieval concepts of the Sons of Cain, or the cursed offspring of fallen angels.<sup>45</sup> Even the mistletoe narrative for the death of Baldr may be inauthentic, as Rooth points to the Irish Myth of the death of Fergus as a likely influence, noting overwhelming similarities in the story beats including the pointing of a blind figure toward the target with a branch of sacred type of tree sharpened into a spear to kill a foster-brother through deception.<sup>46</sup> This creates further questions beyond the absence of Loki in Saxo's narrative. Another issue is that the mistletoe itself may be a misunderstanding, and instead reference the name of a sword.

Both Turville-Petre and Rooth comment on the Christianized aspects of the *Voluspa* and the Ragnarok legend generally. Beyond Turville-Petre's mention of the stars falling from the sky and moral decline as part of Christian influence, Rooth details the release of Fenrir and Loki through the fettered monster trope, the sounding of Gjallarhorn, the arrival of Muspel's sons, the destruction of the world by

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<sup>43</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 127.

<sup>45</sup> Rooth, *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology*, 162-175.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 110-114.

fire, and, finally, the arrival of a godhead who rules in eternal peace.<sup>47</sup> This further suggests that while there may have been a story or series of stories that later inspired the iteration of the Ragnarok myth currently in our possession, this preserved version of the story seems to have been significantly altered through Christianization. The *Hakonarmal* and *Eiriksmal* suggest a safe association with Fenrir and some kind of social collapse, but this may not be a world-ending collapse. Conclusions about both Fenrir and Loki from the Ragnarok legend have to be significantly tempered in light of the high likelihood that the myth is largely a synthesis created through Christianization.

Rooth's work is not without criticism. Her approach at times seems relentless in stripping away aspects of Loki preserved by storytelling, leaving us with very little to work with. In fact, her process takes what seems to be a highly complex deity and eliminates his complexity as foreign influence, concluding therefore that that Loki is a 'spinner' deity associated with spiders.<sup>48</sup> While Loki may or may not be historically associated with spiders, this leaves us with a pile of unanswered questions as to how or why Loki attained all these complex attributes. The quest for an 'authentic' Loki may have a combination of problems at its foundation. Even if we can paint negative aspects of Loki as artifacts of foreign influence, it is still reasonable to note that there may have been an underlying reason that Loki was the target of such influence.

This also raises the frustrating question of what an 'authentic' Loki even is in the first place. Even modern Heathens will be obsessed with the idea of separating out the 'Pagan' version of the stories from the 'Christian' version. The unfortunate reality is that Christianization of these legends was likely very slow, and took place over the course of centuries, and may have even predated the Vikings. Is the Viking Age Loki one that could be considered authentic? The Loki of that time period may have already been significantly affected by Christian influence. Interaction between Germanic cultures and Christians goes back several centuries, and the transmission of ideas between them with subtle and unintentional influences is entirely possible. One idea of the origin of the ill-natured Loki goes back to legends Prometheus and the bound giants of the Caucasus with the suggestion that the Goths were the intermediary of this evolution during the Migration Period. After this interaction, the belief of the bound ill-natured Loki would eventually get absorbed into Old Norse Tradition.<sup>49</sup> This would mean that an 'authentic' 'pagan' Loki might be a Pre-Migration understanding of the deity, making the pursuit of an authentic Loki with any significant detail a needlessly frustrating fool's errand.

Turville-Petre notes that the theory of the Gothic connection might be too complicated to be acceptable, and that it seems more likely that Loki simply inherited the 'fettered devil' trope from Christianity. This may have, in part, been inspired as a reflection of the Christ-like qualities put onto Baldr, who also seems to have been affected greatly by Christianization. In this case, the Icelanders would have made the connection with earthquakes independently from the Caucasus.<sup>50</sup> This would seem to be a more readily believable narrative, and, fortunately, a hopeful one for those seeking a Pre-Christian Loki. However, the Pre-Christian Loki may still be a fool's errand, as the manuscripts containing legends of Loki were recorded centuries after Iceland's ban on public Heathen practice.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>48</sup> Schjodt, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Volume III, "Loki"*, 1268 contains a short discussion of Rooth's work along with that of several other scholars.

<sup>49</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 145.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 145.

The process of demonization between Snorri and Saxo may have had subtly different inspirations. The fettered devil trope seems to have the same origination from Satan and his binding until the battle in Revelation. The influence of Irish storytelling on Icelandic lore may explain the difference in the context surrounding Saxo's fettered Loki and Snorri's fettered Loki. The Icelandic tradition of storytelling may owe much to the significant presence of the Irish wives and slaves among the Viking Age Icelanders.<sup>51</sup> This would give explanation to the apparent Irish influence on particularly negative stories of Loki such as the death of Baldr. Ireland had, at the time, been significantly Christianized, which may have contributed further to the demonization of Loki, AND seems to have taken a slightly different flavor than Saxo's narrative. Saxo's fettered Utgarda-Loki is a direct demonization, substituting the devil for Utgarda-Loki in a Hellish landscape. Snorri's fettered Loki is punished for actions that appear influenced by Irish legend, resulting in a more subtle demonization.

This demonization is particularly present in other, later, folklore of Loki. Saxo and Snorri seem to depict one stage of the demonization of Loki that became more extreme over time. Some later stories of Loki give motivations to him that bear resemblance to Lucifer or Beelzebub, and might place him as a servant of Odin that does his bidding rather than as an equal. This seems to show both that Loki's name was widely known and remembered, but also that his character was likely ripe for demonization.<sup>52</sup> Earlier images of Loki, however, seem to present a kinder character. Among the oldest surviving skaldic poems, we see preserved kennings for Loki such as Raven-God's (Odin's) friend, Hoenir's gracious friend, and Thor's confidant.<sup>53</sup> Rudolf Simek notes that these kennings, taken from *Haustlong*, may point to a more positive role for Loki in earlier myth.<sup>54</sup> This role, may have been that of Lodurr, who is one of the creators of humanity and possibly one of the creators of Midgard.

The likely truth to the historical reality of Loki's representation in myth is a multiplicity of traditions and images around him across various cultures, kingdoms, and even towns. These images of Loki likely also had variety throughout time. What we have today is a snapshot of a mangled image of Loki through multiple Christianized lenses. This has resulted in several academic images of Loki ranging from a spider deity, to mountain dwarf, to trickster, and so on. Given this multiplicity in images of Loki in academia, it stands to reason that there should be a multiplicity of Loki images in modern practice. However, one that casts him as the devil or some sort of evil force is probably the least likely of these images. This means there is simply no value or justification to creating a dynamic in Heathen communities that forbids the worship of Loki or shames anyone who engages with this deity.

## Reconstructing and Reviving Loki

Modern Heathens are typically rooted in some variation of Reconstructionism, which is, basically, that as polytheists, we seek to reconstruct or rebuild an ancient tradition. The primary motivation of this is to emulate the spiritual connection of our ancestors with the Gods in order to recreate that same spiritual connection for ourselves. Therefore, history is of primary importance to the modern Heathen. The scant evidence we have of practices is a plague upon Heathenry, as we often find

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<sup>51</sup> Richards, *Vikings: A Very Short Introduction*, 100.

<sup>52</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Waggoner, *Our Troth: Volume 2: Heathen Gods*, 352 discusses this, and points to Simek's research.

<sup>54</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 315.

ourselves attempting to reconstruct practices off of vague descriptions made by Christians writing sometimes hundreds of years after the events they describe. In spite of this, Heathens endeavor to learn as much as we can about our past in order to bring this ancient faith back to life in a modern reconstruction. This aspect of Heathenry feeds into a cornerstone of the Loki debate, which is the question of a historical cult of Loki.

Whether or not there is evidence of a historical cultus for Loki is a controversial subject. It is common to find scholars who point out that there is no such evidence.<sup>55</sup> The reasons given range from a lack of placenames to the controversial character of Loki himself lending to that of one who is not worshipped, with comparisons being made, interestingly, to Satan. This comparison is different than one above to Satanism, however. In this case, the point is made that Christians believe the devil is real, and that there is much Christian iconography referencing the devil. This does not reveal that Christians worship the devil. Only that he holds an important function within the faith's mythological storytelling.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, scholars of Norse Myth do agree that Loki was, in fact, important. The nature of that importance, however, is debated. Perhaps he was a dramatic figure, whose place in ritual was limited to mythic storytelling.<sup>57</sup>

Among the more ridiculous reasons to hold that Loki was not worshipped among the Norse is the lack of legends in which he engages with humanity. If this standard is to be applied, then the Norse worshipped very few deities. Further, it's not even true if one holds that Saxo's Utgarda-Loki was, in fact, Loki, as this entity answers King Gorm's prayers. This process seems akin to shooting oneself in the foot given the fact that there exists such a limitation on written records associated with the Gods and that those written records seem to have significant elements of Christianization. Considering this, we should be amazed that we have *any* legends of the Gods interacting with humans. Such as it is, we have a handful of stories of interactions with the Gods, but not many, and they're not always positive. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* contains an interaction with Odin which has an overall positive effect on the story, but, within the narrative itself, Odin is dismissed as an evil spirit.<sup>58</sup> Imagine if this had been one of the few surviving myths of Odin— we might have modern Heathens discussing the “demonic Odin” who sometimes grants victory but is likely an evil spirit given Hrolf Kraki's caution in actually accepting his gifts.

Any material artifacts that could be archeological evidence of a Loki cultus are inconclusive and could conceivably be assigned to the veneration of other mythic characters, or are merely a depiction of Loki in a fashion that does not lend to veneration. Unfortunately, the artifacts we find in the dirt do not magically inform us of their historical use. Loki is depicted in the iconography Ulf Uggason references in

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<sup>55</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 126 is but one example of a respectable scholar saying without ambiguity that Loki was likely never worshipped nor was there a Loki cultus.

<sup>56</sup> Schjodt, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, “Loki”, 1263-1264 is a recent work that gives a summary of reasons for the belief that Loki had no religious cultus.

<sup>57</sup> Grundy, *God in Flames*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 56-58 describes the first meeting with Odin in which he offers advice that grants King Hrolf victory against the evil Freyr worshipping King Adils. 68-69 describes Odin offering King Hrolf weapons, but the king refuses. Odin's temper flares as the king had offended him. The king's party leaves, but realizes it was probably Odin and returns. They find that Odin has disappeared. King Hrolf concludes that Odin was an evil spirit. The Christian scribe decided not to depict King Hrolf accepting weapons from demonized Odin, even though earlier the Alfater had granted advice that had allowed King Hrolf victory. Subtle demonization enters even the narratives that might be used as evidence to support a celebrated cultus.

the Hausdrapa, and yet this is not utilized as evidence for a Loki cultus. There is widespread late folklore and folk practices of Loki as a spirit associated with fire, nets, knots, and spiders,<sup>59</sup> and yet for whatever reason this is not evidence of Loki worship. Even direct written records of someone worshipping what might have been Loki are, for whatever reason, considered dismissible. Saxo Grammaticus' King Gorm is referenced as making offering to the bound Utgarda-Loki, *with results*, and yet there is no evidence for a Loki cultus. Gorm does not seem to be worshipping Loki unless one is making the argument against Loki worship. One may have questions as to whether this claim of a lack of evidence is actually the result of a lack of evidence or the result of some bias giving an overwhelming caution against the conclusion of a Loki cultus.

History, however, is fickle, and the limitations we have when observing the past can reasonably give us pause when it comes to making a definitive statement to the existence of a Loki cultus. There does seem to be significant *evidence* of Loki worship. But that evidence is inconclusive and difficult to interpret. This is *why* there can be that reasonable pause in saying whether or not there was a Loki cultus. However, this dynamic goes in both directions. History can be hypothesized in multiple ways, that of a history without a Loki cultus, and that with a Loki cultus. Taking a lack of placenames and artifacts as definitive that no such cultus existed is to eliminate several deities unjustifiably from historical worship. Further, this does not seem to be reasonable justification to shame or even dismiss the modern worship of such deities. Sif, the wife of Thor, is a deity for which we have no evidence of a historical cultus, and yet modern heathens worship her and give offering to her. This practice among Heathens is hardly controversial. The same can be said of Hel, Baldr, Sol, and many others among the Gods. For these deities, we might say that what is not yet found cannot yet be discussed, but that this cannot impede our spirituality. We may then provisionally discuss what a historical cultus may have involved, and work to reconstruct it for our modern practice. The same must be said for Loki.

The likely reality of any historical veneration of Loki is, as previously discussed regarding Loki and myth, a variation across time and place. This is not unique to Loki; in fact, this is what we seem to see with every other deity. Through placename evidence, we see unequal distributions of Tyr, Odin, Njordr, Ullr, and Freyr, all of which seem to have been worshipped as localized high Gods. This variation in localized status was likely coupled with variation of localized myth and traditions. Loki doesn't seem to have been a candidate for a localized high God, but he does seem to have variation when it comes to locality and time period where he may have been worshipped, or at least existed as a part of legend. Several factors may affect one's view of that distribution across time and place. As mentioned, later folklore and folk practices contain a variety of implications about the complicated nature of Loki. These practices are widely distributed and suggest an enduring presence of Loki. Whether or not one accepts the connection between Loki, Lodurr, and either Vili or Ve might affect their view on the nature of Loki and which artifacts may pertain to him. Perhaps Loki did have some veneration as a deity associated with creation mankind and/or Midgard. The character of Loki, too, may have had significant variation. As referenced above, the earlier iteration of Loki may have been a more positive expression of a deity than the one we have portreyed within available records. The difficulty of putting together one coherent or consistent image of Loki with the available information may be because there is no single coherent image of Loki across history. There likely should be little surprise in the shapeshifting Loki possessing such an interesting variety of faces.

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<sup>59</sup> Heide, *Loki, the Vatte, and the Ash Lad: A Study Combining Old Scandinavian and Late Material*, 71-72, 91.

A major argument against the existence of a historical Loki cultus extends beyond evidence of folklore, folk practices, or historical references to worshippers. Instead, the argument rests on the function of religion in the first place, which is that it typically is upholding social norms.<sup>60</sup> Loki seems to violate boundaries of social norms as an essential aspect of his character. Therefore, the likelihood of an organized cultus around Loki is unlikely. This argument, even to a Lokean, might be reasonably agreeable. Even if an *organized cultus* is unlikely, however, it is entirely reasonable to posit *individual* worship of Loki. Turville-Petre explains the lack of Odin placenames in Iceland with a rather convincing argument that Icelanders disliked the worship of Odin due to his association with the throne of Norway. In spite of this, there are famous Icelandic heroes such as Egil Skallagrimsson and Viga-Glum who are described as worshippers of Odin.<sup>61</sup> Just because there were no placenames or temples does not mean that there were no worshippers. Just because the worship of a particular deity did not support the local social order does not therefore conclude that there were no worshippers.

In modern application, the fact that a deity seemed to violate a social order of medieval Iceland does not therefore mean that worshippers today should not worship that deity. The Heathen community would likely dismiss the argument that a Heathen reconstructing an Icelandic practice should therefore not worship Odin due to the lack of placenames and the likelihood that Icelanders did not have an organized cultus around Odin. Such an argument would be seen as ridiculous. Modern Heathens are not practicing in Viking Age Iceland; we are practicing today in our present localities. The political forces that influenced Viking Age Icelanders to avoid Odin do not have the same bearing on Modern Heathens. There are, however, other political forces that might influence us to give Loki a second look, which will be expanded upon in the next section. If there was, ultimately, a historical practice related to Loki, it likely looked very much like the practice of Viga-Glum or Egil Skallagrimsson toward Odin. Loki worship, if it existed, would likely be a personal pursuit and an exception to a family or social order, and may have been part of the spirituality of those who filled a similar social space within their society as Loki among the Gods. These would be people who violated social norms, and perhaps lived on the fringes of society, perhaps even separate from it. Interestingly, this seems to have found a reflection among modern Lokeans.

We seem to regularly find that ancient peoples were far more religious than we typically imagine. The excavation of Pompeii had an evolution of the realization of importance of certain finds. Initially, what were later discovered to be shrines to the *Lares* (Roman house Gods / Spirits) were largely ignored, and left to the open air to be ransacked by the climate. This was due to a lack of realization of or interest in their importance to understanding the Roman religious past. Further examination of this evidence has given to the realization that religious practice encompassed nearly every aspect of Roman life.<sup>62</sup> The case of ancient Heathens is likely similar. Many of the artifacts that we have of Heathen culture contain some aspect of spirituality. This comes in the form of what are likely images of the Gods from myths, to animistic references to land-spirits or perhaps animal guardians of some kind. The everyday life of Heathens, like the Romans, was likely permeated by the Gods and local spirits. Though some idols of the Gods have survived the weathering of time and are miraculously in our possession, many idols, especially related to personal practice, are likely lost to time. Any personal idols or objects of worship made out of wood have likely decayed. Due to the fact that wood is a particularly accessible and easily

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<sup>60</sup> Waggoner, *Our Troth: Volume 2: Heathen Gods*, 364.

<sup>61</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 64-70.

<sup>62</sup> Flower, *The Dancing Lares & the Serpent in the Garden*, 145.

manipulated material, it is the most likely candidate for icons of household or personal worship, therefore representations of such spirituality are unlikely to be found. Even if they were found, they would be subject to the same difficulties of interpretation as other artifacts, particularly those related to Loki.

This means that if historical veneration of Loki largely took the form of personal or maybe household practice, there would be low expectations of finding evidence to support it. Frustratingly, this means that any theory of a historical personalized practice related to Loki may be impossible to ever confirm. However, in the interests of the modern Reconstructionist Heathen, the coherence of this idea becomes particularly interesting. Because it offers a route of imagining what a possible historical Loki practice may have looked like, what a possible historical Lokean might have been like, and what directions could be taken in reconstructing, reviving, or even creating such a practice today. This is where (as is usually the case) the creativity of the modern practitioner comes into play. Most of today's Heathenry is rooted in the imagination of the modern practitioners. Heathens holding some standard of requiring practitioners to historically justify every aspect or even most aspects of their practice by demonstrating its likely historicity would mean the end of our modern practice. Heathen blots, even performed by the most stringent of Reconstructionists, involve significant imagination. Thus, the reconstruction, or better, the *revival* of a Lokean spirituality, is left to the modern practitioners to explore and define.

## **Imagination and the Revival of Loki within the Heathen Community**

The revival of Loki in modern practice may be the step Heathenry needs to achieve escape velocity from certain toxic aspects of Reconstructionism. Much of the focus within the overall Loki debate in Heathenry comes down to whether or not veneration of Loki is a historical behavior. Ultimately, for the *modern* practice of Heathenry, this doesn't matter. Firstly, as we can see, the fact of the matter as to whether or not there were historical practices related to Loki is unclear, and cannot be settled with any real satisfaction. Secondly, even if no such historical practice existed, modern practices venerating Loki do, in fact, exist. Heathenry is, at the end of the day, defined by the practices of modern Heathens, therefore Lokean traditions and practices are part of Heathenry.

Central to the conflict between Nokeans and Lokeans seems to be a perception of legitimacy. Reconstructionist Heathens tend to root this legitimacy in a perception of historical veracity, be it real or imagined. Often this perception of a historical Heathenry has to do more with the individual's perspective on history than any effort toward examining history in good faith. In fact, the individual's perception of history may outweigh any argument or historical evidence against that perception. This is actually quite normal and has been especially the case for the Vikings over the past few centuries, as history has enjoyed multiple cultural visions of the Vikings. Among them, romantic images of the primitive precursors to modern great civilizations, inspiring images of nationalism. At the same time, in England, the Vikings would be painted as the barbaric other when compared to the more civilized Anglo-Saxons. Later, the Nazis would adopt a more sinister version of the Vikings, seeing them as the Nazi's racial forebears and the early medieval example of the master race. This fiction mixed with Norse mythology, Wagner, and German peasant culture became the Nazi image of Aryan culture. This corrupted image of the Vikings and Norse myth continues today to influence neo-Nazis and Folkish

subsections of Heathenry.<sup>63</sup> Each of these images were based on a perspective of history that resonated with each group. Conveniently, the image that resonates with one's own romantic narratives and political desires is the one they considered most likely to be true.

Confirmation bias is a hell of a drug, and Heathenry is steeped in it with respect to a range of subjects, such as Loki veneration, kneeling in prayer, prayer in and of itself as a concept, and even whether or not ancient Heathens saw the Gods as Gods at all, much less having any practice related to them. A significant section of Heathenry seems to view the Gods atheistically, and believe for whatever reason that this is the historical nature of the religion. For many of these people, their perspective is set in stone, and no amount of nuance, historical evidence, or discussion of how to look at history will shift their view. Modern Heathens may view the Gods atheistically, they may not kneel during prayer, they may not pray at all, and they may believe for whatever reason that a practice with Loki is a bad thing to do, but these are not views that can reasonably be enforced as normative in Heathenry through some kind of historical dogmatism.

Nokean Heathens who rest their criticism on their vision of historical truth seem to be of the position that because a number of scholars claim that there is no historical evidence of a cultus centered around Loki, that therefore a modern individualized practice— or worse, incorporation of that practice into a community setting— is illegitimate. This aspect of the debate is captured in Jennifer Snook's *American Heathens* in which someone objects to Lokean traditions by saying that they are instead rooted in a Neopagan view, rather than a Heathen one. The sentiment is that these are Neopagan beliefs masquerading as Heathenry. This is expanded upon, saying about Lokeans that, "It is their demand to be included in the Heathen fold, while insisting that those Neopagan beliefs not be subjected to historical evidence."<sup>64</sup> This is a common sentiment even in my own experience as a Heathen content creator and community leader. The idea of modern UPG or SPG between Lokeans influencing modern Heathenry is the creeping progress of Neopagan beliefs corrupting Heathenry and turning it into a new age fluff bunny tradition with little or no regard for history is pervasive. Instead, the reality is that the tradition is influenced by imagination. This threatens the "purity" of Heathenry as a reconstruction of an ancient tradition emulating the spiritual connection of our ancestors with the Gods.

This purity, however, is an illusion. The very concept of a purity of reconstruction seems to suggest that we only access information about heathenry from historical references, which is obviously not true. Heathenry is a practice reconstructed in large part out of modern imagination. Blots and rituals practiced by modern Heathens may have historical inspiration, but their content is largely a product of modern imagination. This is a necessary component of any serious effort toward reconstruction, especially considering how much the historical image of our tradition is lost to time. A more accurate representation of Heathenry's relationship with history would be to say that Heathenry is a modern tradition heavily inspired by history. Different practitioners will find themselves influenced by that inspiration in different ways. Some Heathens, like myself, find themselves immersed in books searching for the best possible answers to historical questions about how our ancestors practiced, while others may find themselves exploring almost entirely by experimentation through experience. Both of these

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<sup>63</sup> Richards, *Vikings: A Very Short Introduction*, 117-133 contains a thorough examination of often ahistorical influences of the Vikings on culture through the recent centuries.

<sup>64</sup> Snook, *American Heathens*, 76-77.



approaches are good approaches to Heathen spirituality, and any complete approach to Heathenry involves a balance of both. Individual practitioners will find different balances to their liking.

Limiting Heathenry to available historical sources seems to place an undue limitation on what must be a living spiritual tradition in order to have any spiritual value or contribution to a practitioner. There is a certain spirituality to historical research, and that research can enrich modern practice. Having a ritual structure inspired by medieval leechbooks and poetry can certainly enhance the theatrical nature of ritual and give it a historical vibe. This process, however, depends on input from the practitioner and their imagination. The natural extension of this process is new rituals built out of what the practitioner has learned from this process, graduating from the training wheels of historical texts in to filling the gaps left by what history has preserved. If the modern Heathen limits themselves to only practicing that which can be rooted primarily in history, the result will be an incomplete, stagnant practice. Instead of a living tradition, it is a corpse. The practitioner drags this corpse around and celebrates its ability to walk. At some point this becomes a hindrance rather than a benefit. Modern imagination is required for a living tradition to adapt and evolve. Any effort toward inclusive Heathenry has aspects of this dynamic built into its structure. By selecting which aspects of history are valuable to reconstruct and which are not, Heathens engage in imagination. Inclusive Heathens imagine a modern spirituality inspired by aspects of history, but does not reconstruct everything from the past. Inclusive Heathens have opted not to reconstruct the harmful social dynamics around *ergi*, or thralldom, to put forward two obvious examples. This decision fundamentally changes—reimagines—the culture of the religion for a modern understanding of morality, rather than the moral understanding of medieval raiders.

Committing to the stagnation of a practice rooted only in what can be historically demonstrated is an image of Heathenry that lends itself more easily to atheism than polytheism. We would expect that someone engaging with the history of the Heathen world atheistically might conclude that any practice related to a modern veneration of these Gods should be restricted to the available verifiable information from history. A polytheist, however, should be expected to see things a little differently. If we are to see the Gods as real and external to the practitioner, it should be obvious that modern practices are going to be influenced by modern UPG, and especially modern SPG. This does not mean that all instances of UPG or SPG are therefore legitimate. The Heathen community still takes part in evaluating practices and whether or not they are acceptable. After reasonable analysis, practitioners and communities may adopt new traditions sourced from the active community engaging with active Gods.

History gives us the expectation that this will happen, as traditions and beliefs of every religion vary throughout time. Heathen spirituality has demonstrably varied through the centuries, as the spirituality of the Migration Period varies from the spirituality of the Viking Age. Variation even existed among the populations in these time periods. A good reconstruction will have an understanding of and an allowance for modern evolution of practice and perspective. The moral evolution that we see broadly within inclusive Heathenry is an example of this. Even Folkish Heathens engage in an imagined reconstruction, only their version, by design, is one which reinforces their racist ideals. The imagination itself is not a good or a bad thing, it is simply a realistic part of bringing an ancient spirituality into the modern world. What one *does* with this imagination is important, and is the responsibility of the practitioners.

Heathenry will vary into the future because it has never stagnated at any point in its existence. The desire for a singular, unchanging tradition in Heathenry seems to be related to the Christian

background of our culture. Some of us seem to think that a religion *should* remain unchanging through time. This, however, is never how Heathenry has functioned: not today, and not in its ancient past. Even traditions such as Christianity that desire not to change over time still manage to change over time. Reconstructionists will not be the exception to history, and they should know better.

A polytheistic explanation for this variation across time would be that the Gods themselves are dynamic. Clearly, this would be coupled with social variation and the shifting of what is important to humanity, which has a significant part to play. Polytheists generally lack the belief that the Gods are unchanging and instead hold that the Gods are active with dynamic characters who are involved in the world. Loki seems to be a primary example of this. His mixture of kennings implies a complex and changeable set of relationships with the Gods. The evolution of attitudes toward Loki over the centuries, from a polytheist perspective, would have to do with both the change in social attitude toward Loki as well as the activity and change of Loki himself. Loki, the shapeshifter, seems to be the most adaptable of the Gods, so it should be no surprise that attitudes toward him shift through time. As different issues become more important to humanity, different Gods may become more relevant. Today, a myriad of issues associated with Loki are heavily discussed and it should be no surprise that more people are drawn to Loki, or that Loki is more active.

As far as the social explanation, Carolyne Larrington explores some of these motivations in her text *The Norse Myths that Shape the Way We Think*. She pinpoints the dawn of this shift in perspective to the 1970s with the publication of the novel *Eight Days of Luke*, which gives a sympathetic portrayal of Loki as a troubled youth through the character of Luke. From there she describes a number of other sympathetic representations, each of which depicting Loki's "questing intelligence, easy charm, sexual attractiveness, and relaxed relationship with ethical questions that turn him into a favorite anti-hero."<sup>65</sup> Loki has also become a queer icon in recent decades, and his representations usually contain some aspect of sexual and gender ambiguity, reflecting his representation in myth.<sup>66</sup> Marvel's Loki within Marvel's cinematic universe seems to be a go-to representation utilized by Nokeans to discredit Lokeans. And yet, this iteration of Loki reflects the same complexity as other representations, lending to the fanfare around the character. All in all, Marvel's cinematic representation of Loki's character is not far from myth. There are a few obvious revisions, such as the framing of Loki as Thor's brother and Odin's adopted son, but otherwise the character of a close companion of Thor with complex motivations does not deviate far from myth. If anything, Marvel's Loki may be far more prone to villainous behavior than the Loki of myth. Larrington concludes that Loki is emblematic of the classic American Hero, "the wisecracking lone wolf, who answers to no one and sets out to shape his own destiny – for good or ill."<sup>67</sup> This description likely captures what Lokeans see in the deity central to their hearthcult.

The consistency in Loki's representation as a complex character in fiction, not totally hero nor villain, brings to mind his complexity in myth. Any representation of Loki in fiction as a pure villain would be a disservice to the character and would likely be viewed as a fundamental misunderstanding of the source material. Likewise, Heathens who frame Loki as the villain seem to have a misunderstanding of the character, and fail to appreciate Loki's complexity. As a result, Lokeans receive the blame for Nokean's seeming lack of ability to understand their own myths. Lokeans, in their appreciation for a deity

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<sup>65</sup> Larrington, *The Norse Myths that Shape the Way We Think*, 142.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 143-146.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

that may or may not have been worshipped in history, recognize multiple aspects of the nature of religion, spirituality, and Heathenry that seem to be missed by the Nokean camp: the Gods are real and dynamic; religion changes over time, both now and throughout history; and that Loki is a complex character for which any oversimplification is a disservice.

The acceptance of Lokeans within a Heathen community tends to indicate, at least with some consistency, whether or not a Heathen group or organization is actually inclusive. In Ben Waggoner's preface to Stephan Grundy's defense of Loki entitled *God in Flames, God in Fetters*, Waggoner notes several organizations and their respective attitudes on Loki worship within their communities. The Asatru Folk Assembly's founder Stephen McNallen, does not permit horns to be raised to Loki in his presence. The Circle of Ostara has a mixture of claims in their public statement on Loki and his "brood" that seem to hit every note in the far-right conspiracy playbook, including representing Jormungandr as an antisemitic metaphor for international finance. Theodism, a version of Anglo-Saxon Heathenry that employs thralldom, believes that hailing Loki will bind the entire gathering in bad luck. Author Mark Puryear of the folkish Norroena Society, represents Loki as an example of what he views as degeneracy, saying that the Gods had to exile him for his harmful crimes of homosexuality and promiscuity.<sup>68</sup>

Mentioned in the introduction of this paper was Ben Waggoner's articulation of three arguments often used by Nokeans in order to discredit Lokean traditions. These arguments are: (1) Loki is evil; (2) Loki contributes to moral decay; and (3) Loki was never worshipped in history.<sup>69</sup> As we can see, these arguments are far more intertwined than separate. The idea of the evil Loki feeds into the conception that he contributes to moral decay, which provides a justification for why he was never worshipped in history. The further extrapolation of this argument would be that if Loki ever *was* worshipped in history, especially in a personal cultus as described above, it was by people who consented to worshipping an evil God, and/or were afflicted by moral decay. Therefore, it does not matter whether or not Loki was actually worshipped in history. What matters is that certain practitioners have a moral objection to Loki worship.

Looking closer at the idea that Loki contributes to moral decay, this concept seems to be the conclusion of an argument assuming the evil Loki, which seems to be an oversimplification of myth. This feeds into the concept that Loki was never worshipped in history, which is irrelevant on two fronts. The first front is that even if Loki was worshipped in history, it would be assumed that these worshippers were deviants and miscreants. This results in a circular argument that is only justified within itself. The assumption of evil and the nature of moral decay create a vicious circle between each other. The ultimate result is a question-begging circular argument with no real relationship to modern worship. Furthermore, modern Lokeans don't seem to agree that Loki was evil, nor does this really bear out in the evidence, so the premises to the argument are false anyway. The second front is that regardless of whether or not Loki was worshipped in history, he is worshipped *now*, and this worship is a part of modern Heathen culture. Modern Heathens simply have the option of whether or not they accept this fact and what they do with it. The accusation of moral decay comes down to the reality that some Heathens have a preference against behavioral trends present in Lokeans. So, what are these objectional behavioral trends?

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<sup>68</sup> Grundy, Waggoner, *God in Flames*, x-xii.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, ix.

Snook's *American Heathens* describes how the characterization of Lokeans over the years has been reflective of conservative criticisms of changing culture, especially in the United States. Lokeans are characterized as "morally ambiguous, self-centered, and sexually deviant, an image parallel with that of teenage delinquent up to no good." This comparison would even extend to images of Goths in bondage pants. Behavioral criticisms of Lokeans would often lean into *Twilight* references, the vampire series popular with women and tweens in the early 2010s. This framing would feminize and infantilize Lokeans, framing them as childish, whiney, and inauthentic. Lokeans, including men, would also be referred to as "fangirls" of the deity. Given the significant crossover of queer Heathens and Loki veneration, the motivation of framing Lokeans as effeminate becomes clear. This strategy of feminizing, especially men, as a mode of dismissal is and has been a common conservative tactic "since the 1970s to disparage people, beliefs and behaviors" found to be a threat to established social roles.<sup>70</sup> The moral decay in question seems to be the fact that there are LGBTQ Heathens who exist at all. Functionally, the problem with their existence is their femininity, the implication being that femininity is a negative because it is feminine. I would argue that the framing of this as "moral decay" is simply bigotry in the form of sexism and queerphobia and nothing more.

Lea Svendsen in her text *Loki and Sigyn* gives a chronology of the Lokean controversy, pointing out that Nokean sentiments rose prominently in 1997, and seem primarily restricted to American Heathenry. Several organizations, including the Northeast Heathen Community and the Troth, would institute bans on Loki worship in order to keep the peace between rising factions in Heathenry.<sup>71</sup> The broader effect of this strategy seems to have been the placation of queerphobia in Heathenry in the hope that the issue would simply work itself out. Political motivations within Heathenry generally do not dissipate. They instead need to be met head on, as we have seen with the Folkism debate. Divisions may take place as a result, but modern Heathenry has no need for bigotry.

Svendsen points out, with hope, that times seem to be changing with more Heathen organizations relaxing their previous attitudes on Loki. Bans have been generally lifted, especially among inclusive Heathen groups and organizations. She writes, "We owe, in no small part, some of this progress to the LGBTQ+ community. Pagans and new heathens who identified as trans or bi or otherwise queer were drawn to Loki in growing numbers."<sup>72</sup> Now it can be argued (and it is true) that there are other figures in Norse Myth who may be considered gender non-conforming on some level. Odin is an obvious example. Njord and Skadi, too, are candidates. The fact is, however, that queer Heathens are drawn in large part to Loki. A ban on discussion about or worship of this deity is, if nothing else, feeding into the culture and efforts of queerphobia within Heathenry. Such a ban, therefore, has no place in an inclusive organization.

Heathenry generally values applying lessons from the past to our modern experience. It follows then that lessons from the recent past should be especially important. We should endeavor not to repeat the mistakes of the last decade, much less the last millennia. A Heathen organization that has banned the worship of Loki for the nominal reason that there was no historical cultus is massively overstating their case and likely has some secondary agenda. Modern Heathenry is not simply about reviving the religion of the ancient past as it was— as modern Heathens we have opted against

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<sup>70</sup> Snook, *American Heathens*, 74-75.

<sup>71</sup> Svendsen, *Loki and Sigyn*, 65-66.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

thralldom, human sacrifice, and a myriad of other practices we now understand to be harmful. When we consider as Heathens what to revive, bringing back pressures and motivations that would have condemned a practice related to Loki seem unjustified at best, and bigotry at worst. As inclusive Heathens, it would seem reasonable that bigotries of the past should remain in the past.

This does not mean that every blot or event needs to involve Loki, nor does it mean that every Heathen needs to include Loki in their hearthcult. Just as inclusivity of LGBTQ people does not mean that every person needs to be LGBTQ, inclusivity of Lokeans does not therefore mean that every Heathen must be a Lokean. Polytheists worship many Gods, but not every God is worshipped by every polytheist. Heathen hearthcults rarely include every Heathen God. Some individuals will worship Loki, some may not. Reasons may range from not feeling a connection with Loki to simply not desiring a relationship with Loki. Lokeans themselves will often put forward that Loki can be a challenging deity to worship, and some may not wish to engage with such a God. Others may have no reason at all, and just do not feel any need to explore a practice with Loki. The same can be said of the relationships that Heathens have or do not have with Odin, Thor, Hel, Freyja, or Ullr. Any inclusive Heathen organization or community should be able to recognize the diversity of Heathens, and foster an inclusive environment that maximizes tolerance. That community will include Heathens who worship many Gods, and it will include Heathens who centralize Loki in their hearthcult: Heathens who are Lokean.

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