



CELTIC AND NORSE CULTURES INTERPRETED THROUGH THEIR BELIEFS IN THOR AND THE MORRÍGAN

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Thanks to modern movies and the Marvel universe, many people know the name Thor even if they have never read any of the Old Norse sagas or stories. Thor, portrayed by Chris Hemsworth, is seen on the silver screen as a handsome man who relishes the rush of battle and rushes into the fray joyfully with his iconic hammer, Mjollnir. While there is some credibility to this portrayal, particularly the combat abilities of Mjollnir and Thor gladly fighting any foe, this is where the similarities end between the movies and the original stories of the Norse. In original Norse mythology Thor is the red-haired God of Thunder and is the son of Odin, who is mainly depicted fighting the giants who represent the forces of chaos in the universe. While being the God of Thunder, overtime Thor also came to be viewed as a fertility god because of his ability to bring rain through his power over the weather¹ which is a huge factor in the lives of Scandinavian farmers who began to see Thor as their champion among the gods.

Traditionally, Odin is seen as the head of the Norse pantheon. While Odin was the father of Thor, it was Thor who became the most popular of the gods among the common folk. As previously stated, the farmers worshipped Thor for the good rainfall that their crops required in order to have a good harvest. Odin, in addition to being viewed as a war god, was viewed as the god of the nobility, poetry, and rune magic². Within the *Poetic Edda* the story “Greybeard’s Song” has a stanza where Odin taunts Thor about war, stating “I was in the south making battles. I turned princes against one another, I never made peace. Odin receives the powerful men who fall in battle, and Thor receives their servants”³. In the history of Iceland, it is said that the settlers who came to the island were fleeing from the mainland due to a “tyrannical, Odin-

¹ Simek, Rudolf. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. 1993. St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd, Burry St. Edmunds, Suffolk. 319.

² Simek, 319.

³ Crawford, Jackson. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. 2015. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana. 85-86

worshipping king.”⁴ When they came ashore it was to Thor that they asked for the consecration of the land they were to build on.

Further evidence of Thor being the popular god among the Norse is revealed through their requests for him to consecrate wedding ceremonies and the births of children. A Norse custom during a wedding was to place a hammer on the bride’s lap, which was seen as a symbol of fertility. This idea of a hammer being seen as a fertility giving object can be traced back to the Bronze Age due to Scandinavian rock carvings that were dated to be from this time. The carvings depict a man and woman, with a figure above them raising what has been described as a hammer or an axe, and researchers have agreed that this is most likely a wedding scene that has been carved into the rock wall⁵. In “The Theft of Mjollnir”, this custom of the hammer being placed on the bride’s lap is depicted as being followed even among the giants when the order was given “bless the bride, lay Mjollnir on the bride’s knees.”⁶ In another example of Thor’s hammer being used for fertility, it was said that Thor once gave thanks to a family that took him in for the night by killing his two chariot goats in order to have food to share with the family. Saving the skin and bones the bones were then placed into the goat skins. Thor waved Mjollnir over them, and the goats came back to life⁷. This story gives credit to the argument that Mjollnir was a symbol of life and fertility for the Norse.

⁴ McCoy, Daniel. *The Viking Spirit: An Introduction to Norse Mythology and Religion*. 2016. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Lexington, Kentucky. 35.

⁵ Simek, 322

⁶ Crawford, 115-22, Stanza 30.

⁷ Simek, 321

Agriculture was an important concept in the lives of the Norse. While they had established many trade routes, which extended from Scandinavia through North Africa⁸, it was the fear of poor harvests yielding an inadequate amount of food that the Norse truly focused on⁹. Thor, as God of Thunder, was prayed to by the farmers because of his ability to control the weather and therefore guarantee a good harvest. It is because of this that Thor was believed to encompass all aspects of weather such as the wind, thunder, lightning, and rain as the Norse faith got older¹⁰. This is where the idea of Thor being an agricultural fertility god took shape. His role in providing a good harvest for the Norse people solidified his popularity among the farmers of Scandinavia.

Unlike the Norse pantheon, the Celtic pantheons are not as well-known. The Irish Celts worshipped a pantheon called the ‘Tuatha Dé Dannan’, which consisted of many Gods and Goddesses still unknown to the modern world. There are a few, however, which have been made known through Oral Traditions, in the forms of myths and legends, passed down through generations. One Goddess, or rather, a trio of Goddesses, called ‘The Morrígan’; including, Badb, Macha, or Nemain, is a Goddess of War, Prophecy, and Death. She is called by different names depending on which form she manifests herself in. Badb is thought to be the manifestation of The Morrígan in Crow form, Macha is believed to be her manifested as a beautiful woman, and Nemain is present when she manifests herself as chaos. It is understood by most scholars that ‘The Morrígan’ is a generic term of which any of the trio can be called.¹¹ For simplicity, she will simply be referred to as ‘The Morrígan’ here, rather than differentiate between her

⁸ Gundarsson, Kveldulf. *Our Troth: History and Lore*. Edition 2. Volume 1. 2006. BookSurge, LLC, North Charleston, South Carolina. 81.

⁹ McCoy, 36.

¹⁰ Simek, 319.

¹¹ Ross, Anne. *Pagan Celtic Britain*. 1967. Columbia University Press, Columbia University, New York. 244.

manifested names. She can appear as a terrifying hag, a beautiful young woman, or as a crow or raven. Because of her affinity for appearing in her crow form, she is often referred to in myth as the 'Battle Crow' or 'Battle Raven'. Her name, 'The Morrígan' has been translated to mean either 'Great Queen', or 'Queen of Demons'.¹² She is also known for her sexual appetite, and often appears as a beautiful, flawless woman, in order to seduce warriors, heroes, and other deities.¹³ In myths, The Morrígan is described as sinister, terrifying, and powerful.

The Irish Celts held the belief that their gods were never far from reach, always ready and available to assist them.¹⁴ The Morrígan was no exception. She was believed to be a protector of her people in battle, and had the power to influence battles to her will.¹⁵ She prophecies death and destruction, and on occasion, reveals her prophecies to those in danger. She is also a Goddess of Death, and at times, influences events through magical means, which result in her subject's death or survival. She never influences the battles through physical involvement.¹⁶ Her will is impressed upon her chosen through means of magic and seduction. For those she wishes to win the battle, she influences it in their favor. Those, however, whom she wishes to lose, she causes chaos and misfortune to befall to them in battle. Her reasons can be personal, or political. In one example, The Morrígan exerts her sexual energies on the God Dagda, of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, and prophesies to him how he should deal with the upcoming battle against the Fomorians. She also shares with him how she will influence the battle.¹⁷ In this example she is concerned with the outcome of the battle because she wishes for her pantheon, the Tuatha Dé

¹² Ross, 244.

¹³ Mackillop, James. *Myths and Legends of the Celts*. 2005. Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 375 Hudson St. New York, New York. 84.

¹⁴ McCaffrey, Carmel and Leo Eaton. *In Search of Ancient Ireland*. 2002. New Amsterdam Books, Chicago, IL. 75.

¹⁵ McCaffrey and Eaton, 81.

¹⁶ Ross, 223.

¹⁷ Ross, 247.

Dannan to be victorious. In another instance, The Morrigan attempts to seduce the hero, Cú Chulainn, but her advances are denied. Being hurt by his rejection, she promises him she will thwart him in the upcoming battle by attacking him as “an eel, a grey wolf, and a hornless red heifer”¹⁸. Her influences cause Cú Chulainn to be severely wounded in the battle by his opponent.¹⁹ In this case, her reasons were personal.

The Celts in Ireland also believed that the ‘Otherworld’, or next life, was just out of reach, ready to become visible at any moment. This belief was celebrated during their most important festival of the year; Samhain, or their ‘New Year’, of which, being the Goddess of Death, The Morrígan was a key deity.²⁰ The massive celebrations took place from October 31st, to November 1st, similar to today’s Halloween. On Samhain people from across Ireland would travel to a central location to participate in a grand feast, where celebrations, communications with the dead, and ritual sacrifices took place²¹. They believed that this day represented a boundary between the old and the New Year, and because of this, the veil between Earth and the Otherworld disappeared, and the worlds of the living and dead met.²² Because of their deep-rooted beliefs in their re-birth after death, the Irish Celts did not fear death as a final separation from life. Rather, they held a reverence for death and their later re-birth.²³ For this reason, it is not surprising that The Morrígan was such a well-respected deity, and that her holiday, Samhain, was the Irish Celts’ most important festival of the year.

¹⁸ Ross, 220.

¹⁹ Ross, 220-221.

²⁰ McCaffrey and Eaton, 80-81.

²¹ Ross, 57.

²² McCaffrey and Eaton, 80.

²³ James, Simon. *The World of the Celts*. 1993. Thames & Hudson Ltd, London. 89.

A popular Celtic belief that ravens were symbols of prophecy, foreboding, and misfortune also adds to their focus during life on the dead and the afterlife. Druids and others trained in the art of prophecy had the ability to listen to the calls of ravens, and read their flight patterns to divine the future. The Irish Celts were even believed to have domesticated ravens for purposes of divination.²⁴ The future divined from normal ravens was not always evil, however prophecies from The Morrígan, being a supernatural, or otherworldly, raven, were always concerned with destruction, misfortune, or death.²⁵

By comparing the two gods we have described, we see quite a few similarities between the Celtic and Norse cultures. We see that both cultures revere these deities as one of their greatest protectors throughout life and the afterlife. The Morrígan influenced battles, through revelations of prophecies and through magical means in favor of her followers. Thor, while not interfering in the battles of humans, would influence nature to the benefit of his worshippers in the form of rain for the crops. From this, we see that both cultures valued the gods protection and favor in life.

The differences between the cultures become obvious through the roles of the gods themselves. The Morrígan would influence a battle through magical means, as well as choose who was to win or lose a battle according to her will. Thor, despite being a war god, was never seen as one who would involve himself in any battles, except for those against the giants of Norse mythology. The Morrígan's powers are said to be over prophecy, war, and death. Thor's powers include control of the weather, consecration, and fertility for both people and agriculture. For the Irish Celts, The Morrígan represented prophecy, war, and death. Because of the Celtic

²⁴ Ross, 257.

²⁵ Ross, 257.

belief that the veil between this world and the world of the dead could disappear, their symbolic ties to ravens as bringers of death and misfortune, and their sacrificial rituals during Samhain, it is clear their culture held a reverence for death, rather than a fear of it. This lack of fear allowed them to celebrate death, and as a result, celebrate The Morrígan, who did not represent Death as the eternal end of life, but who represented Death as an exciting journey, leading to re-birth.

On the other hand, for the Norse culture, Thor represented their goal of leading a fulfilling life on Earth. Through Thor's blessings in marriages, consecrations of runes and farming sites, and his aid given to creating favorable weather for crops, it is evident that he held a necessary and important role for the Norse in achieving their goal. While raiding was a common trend during the Viking Age, contrary to popular belief, the Norse were not a bloodthirsty people intent on wiping out Christian civilization, but were merely trying to live a fulfilling life by bring glory to their own gods, and creating a secure and prosperous home for their families.

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