

Thor's Hammer

by H.A. Guerber

Thor was the proud possessor of a magic hammer called Miölnir (the crusher) which he hurled at his enemies, the frost-giants, with destructive power, and which possessed the wonderful property of always returning to his hand, however far away he might hurl it.

“I am the Thunderer!
Here in my Northland,
My fastness and fortress,
Reign I forever!

“Here amid icebergs
Rule I the nations;
This is my hammer,
Miölnir the mighty;
Giants and sorcerers
Cannot withstand it!”

Saga of King Olaf (Longfellow).

As this huge hammer, the emblem of the thunderbolts, was generally red-hot, the god had an iron gauntlet called Iarn-greiper, which enabled him to grasp it firmly. He could hurl Miölnir a great distance, and his strength, which was always remarkable, was doubled when he wore his magic belt called Megin-giörd.

“This is my girdle:
Whenever I brace it,
Strength is redoubled!”

Saga of King Olaf (Longfellow).

Thor's hammer was considered so very sacred by the ancient Northern people, that they were wont to make the sign of the hammer, as the Christians later taught them to make the sign of the cross, to ward off all evil influences, and to secure blessings. The same sign was also made over the newly born infant when water was poured over its head and a name given. The hammer was used to drive in boundary stakes, which it was considered sacrilegious to remove, to hallow the threshold of a new house, to solemnise a marriage, and, lastly, it played a part in the consecration of the funeral pyre upon which the bodies of heroes, together with their weapons and steeds, and, in some cases, with their wives and dependents, were burned.

In Sweden, Thor, like Odin, was supposed to wear a broad-brimmed hat, and hence the storm-clouds in that country are known as Thor's hat, a name also given to one of the principal mountains in Norway. The rumble and roar of the thunder were said to be the roll of his chariot, for he alone among the gods never rode on horseback, but walked, or drove in a brazen chariot drawn by two goats, Tanngniostr (tooth-cracker), and Tanngrnisr (tooth-gnasher), from whose teeth and hoofs the sparks constantly flew.

“Thou camest near the next, O warrior Thor!
Shouldering thy hammer, in thy chariot drawn,
Swaying the long-hair’d goats with silver’d rein.”

Balder Dead (Matthew Arnold).

When the god thus drove from place to place, he was called Aku-thor, or Thor the charioteer, and in Southern Germany the people, fancying a brazen chariot alone inadequate to furnish all the noise they heard, declared it was loaded with copper kettles, which rattled and clashed, and therefore often called him, with disrespectful familiarity, the kettle-vendor.

The Tree Yggdrasil

by H.A. Guerber

Allfather next created a huge ash called Yggdrasil, the tree of the universe, of time, or of life, which filled all the world, taking root not only in the remotest depths of Nifl-heim, where bubbled the spring Hvergelmir, but also in Midgard, near Mimir's well (the ocean), and in Asgard, near the Urdar fountain.

From its three great roots the tree attained such a marvellous height that its topmost bough, called Lerad (the peace-giver), overshadowed Odin's hall, while the other wide-spreading branches towered over the other worlds. An eagle was perched on the bough Lerad, and between his eyes sat the falcon Vedfolnir, sending his piercing glances down into heaven, earth, and Nifl-heim, and reporting all that he saw.

As the tree Yggdrasil was ever green, its leaves never withering, it served as pasture-ground not only for Odin's goat Heidrun, which supplied the heavenly mead, the drink of the gods, but also for the stags Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr, and Durathor, from whose horns honey-dew dropped down upon the earth and furnished the water for all the rivers in the world.

In the seething cauldron Hvergelmir, close by the great tree, a horrible dragon, called Nidhug, continually gnawed the roots, and was helped in his work of destruction by countless worms, whose aim it was to kill the tree, knowing that its death would be the signal for the downfall of the gods.

“Through all our life a tempter prowls malignant,
The cruel Nidhug from the world below.
He hates that asa-light whose rays benignant
On th' hero's brow and glitt'ring sword bright glow.”

Viking Tales of the North (R. B. Anderson).

Scampering continually up and down the branches and trunk of the tree, the squirrel Ratatosk (branch-borer), the typical busybody and tale-bearer, passed its time repeating to the dragon below the remarks of the eagle above, and *vice versa*, in the hope of stirring up strife between them.

Source:

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