

Topic Page: [Heimdall \(Norse deity\)](#)

Definition: **Heimdall** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

In Scandinavian mythology, a god of light who guards the rainbow bridge, BIFROST. He was the son of the nine daughters of AEGIR and in many attributes identical with TIU. His name is of uncertain meaning, but has been interpreted as 'world bow'.

Summary Article: **HEIMDALL**

From *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

The Norse god Heimdall was the guardian of Bifröst, a rainbow bridge that linked Asgard, home of the gods, to Midgard, dwelling place of mortals and giants. Only gods were allowed to cross Bifröst; mortals and giants were strictly forbidden even to set foot on it. Heimdall's other role was to blow a curved ram's horn to warn all the gods that the giants were attacking Asgard, signaling the start of Ragnarok, the end of the world of giants and gods.

Heimdall was one of the elder members of the Aesir, the Norse gods who lived in the mythical world of Asgard. Knowledge of Heimdall is scarce because only fragments of information remain concerning the legends in which he would have featured. The main source on Heimdall is the writings of Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), an Icelandic historian whose most influential works include the *Prose Edda*, a treatise that recounts the myth tales in Icelandic poetry, and the *Heimskringla*, an extensive history of Norway. Yet by the time Snorri collated the Norse myths, many ancient legends, such as those pertaining to Heimdall, had either been forgotten or were only hinted at in a few lines of text or in names of characters. For example, Heimdall was sometimes referred to as Gullintanni, meaning "golden teeth," and he rode a horse named Gulltopp ("golden top"), but no one knows why. In addition to Snorri Sturluson, other sources containing references to Heimdall include the *Völuspá*, the *Rígsthula*, and the *Hyndluljóð*. All three were poems of Norse myths written anonymously: the first two served as sources for Snorri Sturluson, and the last appeared in the 14th century.

Heimdall's most important role was as the watchman of Himinbjörg, a kind of gatehouse or entrance to Asgard. Himinbjörg was Heimdall's home and was approached from Midgard, the world of humans, via Bifröst, a brightly colored bridge made from a rainbow. Bifröst linked Midgard to Asgard, and only the Aesir were allowed to cross it; humans and giants were strictly forbidden. The giants lived in a third world called Jotunheim, although many sources say this was a region of Midgard.

Heimdall made the perfect watchman. He had remarkable vision and hearing. He could see a hundred miles in all directions, day or night, and his hearing was so acute that he could hear grass growing in meadows and wool growing on sheep. He also required very little sleep. These talents proved useful because Heimdall's ultimate task was to sound a horn named Gjallarhorn when he spied the giants of Jotunheim amassing for their final attack on Asgard, an event known as Ragnarok.

Birth of heimdall

According to *Rígsthula*, Heimdall also played an important role in the emergence of the human race. In this story Heimdall assumed the name Rig at the beginning of the world. *Rígsthula* in part is the story of Rig's travels. On his journey Rig stopped at the homes of three men—a noble, a farmer, and a slave. In each, he was welcomed and given a meal. He then spent the night in the bed of each host, lying

between the host and the host's wife. Nine months later, the wife of each host gave birth. The child of the nobleman's wife was handsome and fair, the child of the farmer's wife was strong, and the child of the slave's wife was ugly. According to some scholars, the stereotypical difference in appearance of the three children is explained by Heimdall's adoption of the name Ríg. *Ríg* probably means "king" or "lord," and comes from the same Indo-European root that produced Latin *rex* and Sanskrit *raj*.

Other accounts of Heimdall's early life associate him with the sea. In *Hyndluljóð* Heimdall was "imbued with the strength of ... the chill-cold sea." He was also said to have been the son of nine sisters, each a giant wave, who were the daughters of Aegir, the Norse god (or giant) of the sea. Another of Heimdall's links to the sea comes from a version of his battle with Loki, the evil deity who led the giants at Ragnarok. During their fight, Heimdall transformed himself into a seal.

Besides the sea references, Heimdall was also represented as a ram, when he was occasionally called Hallinskíði, meaning "asymmetrically horned," a name that may have arisen because of his Gjallarhorn. Several scholars have pointed out that in Welsh mythology the sea god Gwenthidwy is said to have given birth first to eight waves, called ewes, and then to a ninth and final wave, called ram. These same scholars suspect that, because of the sea and ram similarities between Heimdall and Gwenthidwy's offspring, there must have been a cultural and mythological influence from one group to another, but no ancient literary evidence supporting the theory has been found.

Odin's premonition

Ragnarok, meaning "twilight of the gods," would begin and end with Heimdall. According to Snorri Sturluson, who provided the most extensive account of the whole event, the blowing of Heimdall's horn would signal the start of Ragnarok. It would end when Heimdall and Loki, the last of the gods remaining, fought each other to the death. Ragnarok was to be an apocalyptic battle, and many ancient mythologies and belief systems around the world have similar stories that describe the end of the world.

The Norse god Odin, ruler of the Aesir, knew of the coming of Ragnarok long before it was to happen. Accounts claim that Odin gave one of his eyes in exchange for a drink from the well of wisdom, which belonged to Mímir, a giant. The well lay beneath the roots of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, which, according to some versions, was at the sacred center of the universe. As he sipped the water of wisdom, Odin saw a vision of Ragnarok. First he saw the many signs in nature foretelling the coming of the apocalyptic event. For example, animals gathered their food earlier than usual, and winter lasted for three long, cold years, or the "Fimbul Winter." Then earthquakes began as one of Loki's sons, the Midgard Serpent, wrapped himself around Midgard, shaking it until it cracked open. The seas then rose and flooded the land. Finally Loki himself, who had been chained up by the Aesir because he caused the murder of the beautiful god Balder, broke free and marched his other sons and the giants toward Asgard.

The twilight of the gods

When Odin's vision finally came true and the world had suffered the omens of the long winters, earthquakes, and the escape of Loki, all the enemies of the Aesir would unite to cross Bifröst. The rainbow bridge would collapse under their weight, but they would still reach Asgard. It was then that Heimdall was to sound the Gjallarhorn to indicate that the battle was about to begin.

Heimdall's Gjallarhorn and Gabriel's Trumpet

The final battle of the gods, Ragnarok, would begin when Heimdall sounded his horn to warn the gods of the approaching demons, giants, and monsters, enemies of the Aesir. The horn was first mentioned in the poem *Völuspá*, although it was not named. Thirteenth-century chronicler Snorri Sturluson expanded on this reference and named the horn Gjallarhorn, which may mean "the yelling horn." He described it as a drinking-horn and said it was the vessel from which Mímir, a wise being who was either a giant or a god, drank the water from his well of wisdom. The horn, according to Snorri Sturluson, was so loud that it could be heard everywhere, so that when Heimdall blew it, all the gods, humans, and other creatures would know that Ragnarok had begun.

In Christian mythology the archangel Gabriel is comparable to Heimdall in that he too blows his horn, a trumpet, to warn the world that Judgment Day, at the end of Armageddon, is beginning. It is believed that is when God will judge all Christians, living and dead.

During the battle Thor, mightiest of the Aesir, would slay the Midgard Serpent, but as it was dying, the serpent would spit venom onto Thor, killing him too. Then the dwarves of the dark, enemies of the Aesir, would throw waves of fire on the earth, destroying all life, while the sun died and the stars fell from the sky. Odin would be devoured by Fenrir, a giant wolf who was one of Loki's sons. Then one of Odin's sons, Vídar—whom Snorri Sturluson compares to the hero Aeneas as depicted in the *Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE)—would kill Fenrir by stepping on the giant wolf's lower jaw and ripping its mouth apart.

As the battle raged, all creatures and things were to be destroyed, except for Heimdall and Loki, who would eventually kill each other, and the humans Líf and Leifþrasir, who would survive by hiding underneath Yggdrasil. As the world repaired itself, Líf and Leifþrasir would begin a new race of humans.

Echoes of Ragnarok

Parallel myths to Ragnarok exist in many cultures around the world, most notably in the Christian event known as Armageddon. According to Revelation, the last book of the Bible, Armageddon will be the final battle between the forces of good and evil, with the world ending in fire and the archangel Gabriel sounding his trumpet to herald Judgment Day. Some scholars have suggested that Snorri Sturluson's version of Ragnarok was influenced by the sermons of Wulfstan, an 11th-century archbishop in England. Wulfstan's preachings were documented and had been made available in the 13th century, when Snorri Sturluson could have read them. Although the similarities between Wulfstan's Armageddon and Snorri Sturluson's Ragnarok are many, no direct link to the Bible or acknowledgment to Wulfstan from the Icelander have been found.

See also: APOCALYPSE MYTHS; BALDER; CREATION MYTHS; LÍF AND LEIFÞRASIR; LOKI; ODIN; SCANDINAVIA; THOR.

Further reading

Colum, Padraic. *Nordic Gods and Heroes*. New York: Dover Publications, 1996.

Orchard, Andy. *Cassell's Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*. New York: Cassell, 2002.

BARBARA GARDNER

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Gardner, B., & GARDNER, B. (2012). Heimdall. In *Gods, goddesses, and mythology*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Reference. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/heimdall_norse_deity

 Copyright © 2012 Marshall Cavendish Corporation

 Copyright © 2012 Marshall Cavendish Corporation

APA

Gardner, B., & GARDNER, B. (2012). Heimdall. In *Gods, goddesses, and mythology*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Reference. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/heimdall_norse_deity

Chicago

Gardner, Barbara, and BARBARA GARDNER. "Heimdall." In *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*. Marshall Cavendish Reference, 2012. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/heimdall_norse_deity

Harvard

Gardner, B. and GARDNER, B. (2012). Heimdall. In *Gods, goddesses, and mythology*. [Online]. Tarrytown: Marshall Cavendish Reference. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/heimdall_norse_deity [Accessed 14 November 2019].

MLA

Gardner, Barbara, and BARBARA GARDNER. "Heimdall." *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*, Marshall Cavendish Reference, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/heimdall_norse_deity. Accessed 14 Nov. 2019.