

📖 Topic Page: [Loki \(Norse mythology\)](#)

Definition: **Loki** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(lō'kē), Norse giant (or deity) who personified evil. He hated the gods of Asgard and continually sought to overthrow them. His worst exploit was the murder of Balder, for which he was punished by Thor. It was prophesied that when Ragnarok (the doom of the gods) occurs, Loki, with the aid of his monstrous children—the Fenris wolf, the Midgard serpent, and the goddess Hel—would lead the enemies of heaven.

Summary Article: **Loki**

From *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Myth*

Loki's nature. Loki ('allure' or 'fire'; also known as Loder, Loke, Lokku, Lopter and Lopti; German Loge), in Nordic myth, was both the oldest and the youngest of the gods. He existed before existence, as an idea: the principle of irrationality, of mischief, which subverts every attempt by others to make an ordered universe. In some accounts he was the brother of **Odin** and **Honir**, one of the three creator-gods, and his gifts to **Ask and Embla**, the first human beings in the world, were like those of the wicked stepmother in later fairy-tales: desire and passion. Other accounts say that he was able to take shape, to slip into bodily existence, only long after the other gods—and then by cunning and despite all their efforts to prevent it. His father Farbauti struck stone on flint, a spark leapt into the underbrush of his mother, the wooded island Laufey, and Loki took on the shape of the resulting **fire** as a human being shrugs on a garment. Like fire, he remained unpredictable and hard to control. Sometimes he was ingratiating and helpful, as well-mannered as a cooking-fire; at other times his mischievous, conscienceless trickery, unstoppable as forest-fire, engulfed everything it touched. His charm made him irresistible to goddesses and mortal women alike. But he was fickle, and passed from encounter to encounter as eagerly and as irrevocably as flames sweep through cornfields.

Loki the shape-changer. Loki was a **shape-changer**, able to take on the appearance of whatever he chose: a puff of smoke, the blush on a girl's face, fish, bird, insect or animal. As Asgard-Loki (when he lived in **Asgard** with the **Aesir**) he was a seducer; as Utgard-Loki (when he lived in **Utgard** with the **giants**) he was a **monster**. His disguises included flea, fly, giantess, salmon, seal and bird—and he worked the last change by stealing **Freyja's** feather-cloak. Few other gods shared the skill of shape-changing—most had one attribute only, for example youth, **wisdom**, strength or **beauty**, and could assume others only with difficulty—and Loki basked in it. He used it sometimes to benefit others, sometimes to trick them, sometimes to save his own skin, but always with delight.

Loki and Svadilfari. After the war between Aesir and **Vanir**, when the Aesir wanted the wall rebuilt round their citadel Asgard, Loki tricked a rock-giant into doing the work. He said that if the wall were finished by the first day of spring, the giant's rewards would be the Sun, the Moon and Freyja, the love-goddess. Horrified at the thought of losing Freyja, and hence the pleasures of love, the gods tried to refuse the bargain; but Loki promised them that there was no way for any giant, however strong, to build the wall in a single winter. The giant, however, was helped by his stallion Svadilfari, who worked tirelessly to haul boulders and build the wall.

Three days before the end of winter, only the gate-pillars were needed to complete the wall, and the gods were already beginning to feel intimations of love-loss, chill as a shadow. But Loki cheerfully told them to trust him. He took on the appearance of a seductive mare, prancing before Svadilfari and

leading the stallion away from the stone-pile into the woods. The rock-giant, furious, was forced himself to lug boulders for the gate-pillars, and failed to finish the wall in time. He stormed before the gods, and roared that he would take his rewards by force. But **Thor** smashed his skull with a single blow, and tossed its fragments out of Asgard. Soon afterwards, Loki trotted into Asgard, still in the shape of a mare, and beside him was the eight-legged foal Sleipnir, Loki's child and the fastest animal in creation. Loki gave him to **Odin**. So the king of the gods got a charger which could outride the winds, the gods got their wall and kept Freyja, and Loki had the pleasure of knowing how a mare feels when she mates with a stallion and gives birth to a foal.

Loki's marriages. Loki was sexually insatiable, and mated with gods, humans, giants, animals, rocks and trees. He married three wives. The first, Glut ('glow'), bore him two daughters: Esia ('ember') and Einmyria ('ashes'). The second, the giantess Angboda ('grief-bringer'), bore him monsters: the wolf-giant Fenrir, **Hel**, ruler of the Dead, and the world-serpent **Jormungand**. The third, Sigyn, bore him two sons: Narve and Vali.

Loki and Ragnarök. By nature, Loki was fickle and easily bored. For most of the life of the universe he was happy to live with the gods, soothing his restlessness by inventing adventures, trying new disguises and playing practical jokes. But gradually, as time passed, he began to resent the fact that he was never respected as much as some of the other gods, particularly Odin. This resentment turned first to bitterness, then to fury. He arranged to hurt Odin not by playing a trick on him but by causing the death of **Baldur** the Beautiful, Odin's son—and when Baldur was dead he refused to mourn him, so preventing him rising again from **Niflheim** to Asgard.

Odin tried to persuade Loki to change his mind by banishing him from banquets in Asgard—but Loki turned up anyway and spent his time killing servants and insulting the gods by reminding them of past failures and failings, one by one. Finally persuaded that Loki was beyond control and should be locked away before he destroyed the universe, the gods turned Loki's son Vali into a wolf and set him on his brother Narve; then they used Narve's entrails to bind Loki deep in the cave-kingdom of the giantess **Skadi**, who hung a serpent above Loki's head, forever dripping venom. Only the loyalty of Loki's wife Sigyn stopped Loki being eaten away by the venom. She sat by his side in the darkness, catching the drops in a wooden dish, and only when she turned away to empty the dish did drops fall into Loki's eyes, causing him to writhe in agony: the origin of earthquakes.

Ragnarök, the end of this cycle of time, will begin, the myth ends, when Loki at last escapes from the cave. His wolf-child Fenrir will jump from Earth to Sky and eat the **Sun**, and his serpentson Jormungand will stir up a tidal wave and spit venom-showers to drown the stars. Loki, fire, and the giant Hrymir, frost, will jointly lead the forces of darkness against the gods, and the battle which follows will destroy all living things. At the end of the battle only Loki and Hrymir will be left: fire and ice, as at the beginning of the first creation—and from their merging a new cycle will begin.

*It was characteristic of Nordic society that people thought it possible to ward off danger by using jokes and irony. This applied to Loki. Ignoring his savagery and his future role as destroyer of creation, people concentrated on his lighter side, so that hundreds of myths and tales survive showing him as **trickster** and anti-hero, feckless rather than dangerous—the story of him outwitting the giant **Skrymsli** is typical. Even when he causes real trouble (as in the myths of **Sif's hair** or the death of **Otr**) he is shown as seductive rather than vindictive: a main part of the pleasure seems to have been to place him in impossible situations and see how cleverly he would wriggle out of them. His shape-changing meant that there was no standard image of him in fine art: representations ranged from flames, a fish and a*

hawk to a handsome, youthful warrior. After Christianity came to Northern Europe, however, there was no such problem. Loki was identified with the Devil, and shown as a kind of bound gargoyle, at the foot of Christ's cross or with Christ standing over him in triumph.

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