

## CHAPTER 15

### THOR'S CONQUEST OF THE MIDGARD SERPENT AS A TRANSCENDENT VICTORY OVER THE WATERS

In the well-known Nordic legend of *Hymiskviða*, the god Thor conquers the Midgard serpent<sup>683</sup> while out fishing with the giant Hymer. Baiting his hook with an ox-head, Thor casts his line and catches the world-serpent, who lies at the bottom of the ocean, bound, waiting for Ragnarok to release him. The story is the same as the defeat of the serpent Vritra by Indra in the *Rig Veda*, and by comparison of the two, a deeper understanding of the meaning of the waters in Indo-European myth and Thor's victory over them is found.

#### THE STORM GOD

Thor, of course, is the hero-god of the north, the lightning god, who with his goat-drawn chariot storms through the sky, flashes of crimson being but his red beard blown by the night wind. He was the protector of the people and an agricultural god, the son of Odin, and a figure found throughout the mythologies of the Indo-European peoples, from the Hittite-Mittani Teshub to the original Italic-Roman Mars. In the *Eddas*, Thor is referred to as Indridi, and this name is the same as the Vedic Indra, as well as one of the many links between Nordic and Indo-Iranian religions.

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<sup>683</sup>Jörmungandr.

## THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

In the Nordic mythos, the gods each day cross a bridge<sup>684</sup> to the lower world to sit at the well of Urd and judge the souls of men who had died. Thor is the only deity who does not arrive by the bridge, because he is so powerful that his presence upon the bridge would destroy it. He cannot use Bifrost to ascend to the heavens and Asgard for the same reason. Instead, when Thor approaches these centers of power, he must “wade through the waters” of the 12 rivers of the Elivagar<sup>685</sup> into the lower world, and wade through the waters of the heavens to gain entry into the upper.

### THE BRIDGE

Plutarch, in his commentary on the term “pontifex maximus” as used in Rome under the laws of Numa, states that a possible meaning<sup>686</sup> is that of “greatest bridge.” Julius Evola believed this was the correct interpretation of the term, and that the idea of the bridge over the waters is that of the path of the human soul from the mundane world to the transcendent. The waters are the spiritual currents and energies over which the soul must cross in order to reach the center of spiritual power. Applied to the Nordic mythos, the shattering of the bridge by Surt when he storms the citadel of Asgard in the battle at the end of the world represents the shattering of all possibility of transcendence in the final and most decadent age of man.

In such a context the defeat of the Midgard serpent by Thor must be read. Indra defeats the serpent Vritra as Thor defeats Jörmungandr. Vritra is a word that means “the encircler,” and another name given him in the Vedas is Acajana. As Viktor Rydberg notes in Volume II of his *Teutonic Mythology*, the name “Acajana” is the precise same as the Indo-European Greek “Okeanos”—from which our word “ocean” is derived. Thor’s defeat of the Midgard serpent is his conquest of the spirit of the ocean—the “river” that encircles the Earth.

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<sup>684</sup>Bifrost.

<sup>685</sup>“Living waters.”

<sup>686</sup>Which Plutarch erroneously discredits.

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This idea of Ocean is the same held by Mykenaeen Greeks and their successors, who noted that their monsters, like the serpents descended from Jörmungandr or Vritra, were the descendents of either Okeanos, Pontus or Poseidon, all gods of the sea.

### THE PARTING OF THE WATERS

The Egyptians, the Sumerians, the people of the Indus civilizations and their descendents all believed the world was created by a “parting of the waters” that occurred when the “waters of the sky” were separated from the “waters of the Earth.” In ancient Egypt, it was believed that the Egyptian civilization was Ma’at, and that it represented a small pocket of order in a sea of chaos, or Isfet, that, if proper ritual was not maintained, would flood in and engulf the entire Earth. These beliefs are related to the beliefs in a world surrounded by ocean found in later Aryan myth. The “ocean” of the Greeks, the Norse and the Indo-Iranian peoples is not merely the waters of what we refer to as oceans, but the waters of the heavens and the underworld as well. In the Nordic tradition, the well Hvergelmir was believed to be the point where the mead of the “ice-cold sea” and the waters of the underworld were joined. Similarly, the rivers that emerged from Hvergelmir flowed not only throughout all the underworld, but into the heavens as well. The “waters” that we call outer space, the waters of the ocean, and the waters of the world under the Earth are one.

When these waters are understood as spiritual currents—as ways of being that can carry off the activity of the mind when it attempts to chart the soul’s journey to a higher mode of existence—then the myth of Thor’s conquest over these currents can be better understood. What Thor does when he defeats the Midgard serpent is not merely subdue a beast that threatens the Earth, but conquer a chaotic spiritual force that stands between himself and transcendence. In this sense, the conquest of the serpent by the storm god can be compared to the conquest of the feminine force of Shakti by the god Shiva, as understood in the late Hindu-Tantric tradition.

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### THE DIVINE WOMAN

The pervasive belief of the Indo-European peoples was that, along with the body, man had a literal soul-being, usually a sort of divine woman, with whom he was united in what the Greeks called *ιερός γάμος*.<sup>687</sup> In modern terms, this has devolved into what we call a “soul-mate,” though the original meaning literally meant a spiritual being with which a man found unity. The Egyptians conceived of this being as the *ba*; the Norse conceived of it as the *hamingjar*.

But not only men had souls, but also places and events. The Roman cult of Victory was directed toward reenacting the circumstances of an enemy's defeat in order to keep alive the feminine spirit that the defeat had created, and then channeling her and bringing Roman society into unity with her. In the Mykenaeen Greek nations, there was the similar cult of Nike, who was a handmaiden to Athena. In the Nordic countries, the spirit of victory was the valkyrie. When the warrior entered into battle, his conquest created or invoked a spirit, in service to Odin, with whom the warrior achieved unity and transcendence. Ultimately, it was thought that man was unified with his guardian spirit in death; to achieve unity with this spirit, or daemon, during life was a “conquest of death,” and was seen as the first step in the warrior's spiritual path.

Another way of viewing the relationship is in the context of centrality. The male principle among Indo-Europeans was the center; the female principle was the movement about it. The male was like the Sun, who brought the feminine—the planets—into alignment around him through the strength of his gravity. The masculine principle asserted his supremacy by maintaining a strength that was unmoved by the pulls of feminine energy and which bent feminine energy to his will.

After the conquest of the religion of the Great Mother in the Near East, and the subjugation of the cult of Kali in India, this Aryan feminine divine

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<sup>687</sup>*Hieros gamos*, or divine marriage.

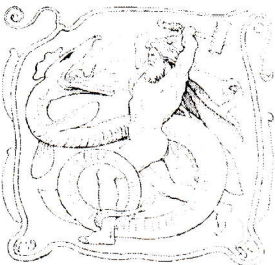
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became identified with the conquered feminine divinity of the non-Aryan peoples. These two women were not identical in their original conceptions, but were syncretized to produce a composite being.

### CROSSING THE WATERS

When Thor defeats the spirit of the ocean, the world serpent whom Odin has bound at the bottom of the sea, he has affirmed his right to traverse the waters of ocean—the waters of the sky, the sea and the underworld—without a bridge. He has proved himself above all waters and all currents and has become the ultimate expression of the male principle, the center who moves and thus forces the waters to move around him. This ultimate center is the self-transcendent being—the god above all forces of decay.

In later myth, Thor proves himself the greatest enemy of what Savitri Devi calls the forces “in time,” though he is unable to prove his complete superiority over them. In the journey to the hall of the giant Útgarda-Loki, a master illusionist, Thor, upon arrival, first attempts to drain a “drinking horn” that is the sea; then attempts to lift a “cat” that is the world serpent (shape shifted); then wrestles an “old woman” who turns out to be Old Age and Time itself.<sup>688</sup> This battle is the same as the one Thor has already waged against Jörmungandr, except here Thor can barely hold his own against these enemies. First, Thor lowers the level of the sea, but cannot bring all of it within himself. Thor can traverse the currents, but he cannot bring all of them into himself. Thor lifts Jörmungandr partially out of the ocean, but cannot fully lift him—Thor can bend the currents somewhat to his will, but he cannot destroy them. Thor is brought to his knees by old age, but not slain by her—Thor can fight Time, but cannot destroy it.



Thor fighting the serpent

<sup>688</sup>Útgarda-Loki describes this woman, Elli, “Old Age,” as Útgarda-Loki’s nursemaid, suggesting that he is initiated into the occult currents of the men in time.

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Similarly, the Vedic Indians knew of Mahakala, the god Time, the Great Destroyer. Men could stand in Time, dragged along by its current; above Time, not affected by it nor resisting it; and against Time, in which case they would be defeated, but their defeat would be glorious and would lay the foundation for the final destruction that would bring Time back to its original state. History is viewed as a record of the struggle of Time against Order, and the final “victory” of Chaos, which destroys itself and thus resets Time. This is the Egyptian fear of the final conquest of Isfet and a return to the waters combined with knowledge of a rebirth and a new golden age.

Thor is thus the ultimate Man Against Time—superior to it, he cannot be defeated by it, but he knows that in the end Time will destroy all things, including himself and itself, and that this is needed for the world to be reborn. Thus, at Ragnarok, he slays Jörmungandr, ending the rule of the currents of Time, takes three steps, and then dies from the serpent’s poison. Thor knows his death must occur so that the world may again live.

### CONCLUSION

Thus must the story of Thor’s battle with Jörmungandr be understood. Jörmungandr is more than just an evil snake—it is the representation of the death-force of modernity itself—the eternal enemy of mankind and of all goodness, whose victory is as necessary as it is evil. Thor is not merely fishing for a giant snake, but he is asserting his right to cross the sky and the underworld at will, unchallenged, blazing his own path by mere force of his will. He refuses to be servant to this evil, and stands against it, independent and free, until the end.