

# Loki

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## Resumen

El artículo lleva con un análisis general en los mitos que implican el personaje de Loki y su relación con cosmología y las cosmogonías escandinavas.

Palabras-claves: mitología nórdica; Loki; Escandinavía.

## Abstract

This article carries through a general analysis on myths involving the Loki personage and its relation to cosmology and the Scandinavian cosmogony.

Keywords: Norse mythology; Loki; Scandinavia.

Little more than a thousand years had elapsed since the Christ saw the light of his first day. At that time, the monasteries were chanting songs and praises to his majestic, imposing, fearsome and beneficial coming. A thousand years after which, the prophecy and its turmoil were accomplished. Far away, a little beyond the glass, the small figures that worked the land emerged transparent, distant from the monastic silence, from voluntary retirement, from the crystalline bubble that separated those men from the world, a bubble certainly built on rock foundations, on rock walls, of wrought and immortal stone.

The figures move slowly, tired but satisfied, the sun begins to rise and it lifts a scent of humid and cold earth. Do the Thousand years matter there? Why would they matter in a place where there are not calendars, in a place where the time is as variable as a lit candle, as a hurried or complacent prayer? Do the years matter there, in a place where the crop is born green and solemn?, where the grain becomes bread?, where time begins time and again in spring?

A little farther it does not matter either, a little farther from everything, it does not make sense. There, every now and then, the Roman troops tried to enter and in some occasions they left victorious and in so many others, they were humiliated, neither by armies, nor by generals or by fierce and arrogant commandants, but rather by wild barbarians that screamed amid the trees, barbarians that as soon as they fell pierced by arrows, got up and came back in even larger numbers. Did they maybe multiply? Did they maybe emerge by art of enchantments?, or were they so strong that as soon as they disappeared, they were here, there, delivering blows, slashing, piercing with lances and rustic swords?, with lances made of ash-tree wood or of oak wood?, of sacred woods? Indeed, as they undoubtedly loved trees. And why not?, when the universe itself was a living tree: Yggdrassil, on which the whole existence hung under its imposing branches, why not? when its leaves covered the time, the space, the transcendence and the banality?, why not? when its roots sheltered the gods and the humans under the same roof?, a green, throbbing, cold and encircling roof that established a nexus among all things alive.

Once, Tacit, that incredible man, had called Germania all those Nordic, humid and mysterious lands, as dark and impenetrable as the forests that wrapped it, but Germania was already in the past, conquered, civilized and integrated to the great Orb. Centuries later, a small bastion would survive and we, with that same foundational desire, would call Iceland that island where the fire cohabited with the ice. There, in the year one thousand, the Christianity had not yet arrived. Others would call it Hyperborean, and the inhabitants of those lands would see it as the sacred Thule where all the gathered knowledge welcomed the gods in peace, to all of them, without exclusion.

There, everything smelled of divinity, and from that place, the government of the gods was lapsing in the unalterable and suspended time. There the constant was the "Eternal Return" of Eliade, the "floating time" of Bloch. There, the future was annulled portentously, but not in the intellectual agustinian systematization - sincere, we could not doubt it - that since the IV and V centuries, cooed with its clarifying word the mind of the monks, those that centuries later would not refrain from copying and illuminating their works, with human precision, with transcription errors and interpretation errors in each one of those unique and alive texts, for we should not forget either that through the scriptorium, the ink slowly consumed the copyist's life, and it captured it in his work.

No, there the time had a different value and a different sense. Europe did not still know that was living the Middle Ages.

But, let us go on. Let us continue amid those rainy forests and let us leave behind the villages and hamlets where one lives happily and with indefatigable work spirit, for every day is a constant fight for survival in the face of a hostile environment. Besides, a new danger loomed over those regions and it caused an unsuspected fear: one after another, the incursions of the Vikings devastated those lands. It is true that, since the IX century, the Scandinavian towns and mainly the Normans, carried out their forays through Northern Europe, and that many times they reached the most southern regions in a constant expansive process that would last until the beginnings of the XII century, their presence nonetheless was always devastating.

The times in which Charles The Great had brought a certain cohesion and tranquility to great part of Europe were in the past, that golden time in which the Emperor Augusto had brought the Franks to touch the pleats of the Roman greatness, formerly as terrible and Germanic as the people that inhabited Scandinavia. The Vikings that slowly went spreading through Europe: the Normans (Also called Danish by the Franks), the Jutos, and why not mentioning it, the Anglos and Saxons themselves, those Germanic tribes coming from Denmark that had invaded Great Britain around the V and VI centuries.

They were dangerous but useful peoples, not only because of the commercial expansion carried out by the Swedes through the Russian steppes, penetrating in the continent through the Volga and Dniéper and opening new commercial routes toward oriental lands. In those days, the Roman Emperor of the East, had in Constantinople a personal guard of Viking warriors: the Varegian guard. In a similar fashion to what, to the West, meant the praetorians, Hérulos, and its king Odoacro.

In occident the situation was undoubtedly not so promising. Some time had already passed since, by force of attacks and plundering of important cities such as Hamburg, Ruán, Bordeaux and Paris herself, the Franks had accepted to cohabit with the Normans, signing a treaty with them in the year 911. But the belligerent fury of these peoples did not cease with their establishment in Normandy, their impulse went far beyond, following the flaming footprint left behind by the king Canute II the Great during the XI century, upon the founding of his Scandinavian empire in Northern Europe, subjugating under his might Denmark, Sweden and England herself, the conquests continued. Years later, the Duke of Normandy, William the Conqueror, would snatch England definitively from Anglos and Saxons in the year 1066, after his victory in the battle of Hastings, ending the Anglo-Saxon primacy in the great island.

Amid the wars, the expansion and the conquest, Medieval Europe was slowly being defined, and between the battles and the weakness of the kings, the feudal system was progressively being secured. An indelible trail of fire left behind by these warriors.

Let us continue our trip, beyond where the men lived, where the ice and the greenery mingled under the clouds and a rough sea. There, where the gods dwelled and History was just another one amid divinities: Saga, Odin's partner, sang to the victories and to the defeats, both so necessary. The victories because they secured the terrestrial domination, the defeats, so important, because they nurtured God with faithful and valiant warriors.

In those days, Saga was being covered with myths, because behind the curtain of trees, time was not captured by the dates, and why to do so?, if the facts worthy of memory were always remembered, if the simple and banal facts were so soon forgotten. Everything had begun so long ago and nevertheless, the gods were still roaming the earth, running, riding, throwing thunders and making the fields flourish. The mysterious creatures still populated the swamps and the paths, they dwelled in the houses of men and they slept under their roof.

Still in the silence, it was remembered that long ago, when nothing yet existed nor had its own essence, only two worlds existed. To the north, Niflheim, region of ice, to the south, Muspelheim, region of fire. There, giant Sutr inhabited, armed with a shiny sword. A great abyss, Ginungagap, separated both worlds.

Let us remember the words of Vala, in the Elder Edda<sup>2</sup>, because nobody better than her can tell us about the origin of everything. In this place far from everything, her voice turns into an epic song, a perfect mixture of anger and divinity, of deep love for all the existing things:

"From the breast of countless winters  
before the earth was made  
Bergelmer was born:  
Thrudgelmer was his father,  
His grandfather Aurgelmer

From Elivagar's breast  
sprang venom drops,  
which grew till they became a giant;  
but sparks flew  
from the south-world:  
to the ice the fire gave life.

They said that under Rhimthurs' arm  
A girl and a boy grew together;  
Foot with foot begot  
of the wise giant,  
a six headed son" (Niedner 1997: 11)

The icy great ocean extended through unknown regions, above Ginungagap, the sparks fought against the cold vapors of ice, and from this primitive battle among the elements, Ymir was born, named by the giants as Aurgelmer, the quintessential giant. From the sweat of his arms, two children, female and male were born. From the sweat of his feet, the rest of the giants were born.

Ymir fed of the milk of the Audhumbla cow, from her, the liquid flowed through four springs from which the giant picked up his food. Audhumbla fed in turn of ice. One day, while the cow licked the frost, a head of hair appeared among the ice, the second day a frozen head arose, the cow continued licking the icy bark and she wasted no time in discovering the figure of a god: Bure, the father of the gods. The god, soon came back to life and he engendered his son Böor, who in turn, surrendered in marriage to Bestla, the daughter of giant Bolthorn: of that union three gods were born: Odin, Vili and Ve: the spirit, the will and the sacred. In those days, a bloody fight was sustained by the gods against the giants of the ices.

Odin, Vili and Ve, gave death to giant Ymir, and they deposited his cadaver in the abyss: thence the birth of the mainland, of his decomposed body, all the existent things took shape. Midgard, the earth, would begin to be inhabited. From the very beginning of the creation, until the moment of the final destruction, the existence is a constant fight, a cosmic battle with a predictable and unequivocal end: the destruction by which, everything is renovated and restarted, a destruction by which everything returns to their primitive and prodigious state.

The Nordic mythology is a great tragic adventure of destruction and redemption, it is an unstoppable current of fall in which gods, giants and humans are carried toward

its inevitable end. An instinctive reunion with death and rebirth, a cosmic eternal rearrangement that destroys and engenders in a constant chain. However, we should not believe that this is a system that does not await for hope, not at all, that is unthinkable. In the creational and destructive synthesis, the lineal sense gets lost. What is it first?, the beginning or the end? Did not Bure lie panting in the ice?, was not that god a seed?, a seed the same as Balder, the god that will be reborn after the twilight?

A multitude of gods and beings are included in this system, each one taking his place in the cosmic dynamics that Ygdrassil, the universal tree suggests. However, two powers emerge facing each other and in need of each other. Odin the father of the gods, and Loki, the destructive fire. Many times, due to the importance of their fight, we forget their mutual necessity, many times in search of the life, we forget the necessity of the continuous and incessant death.

Loki is the burning Fire that travels indefatigable the paths, he who illuminates the solitude and drives away the shades after giving them the precious life. A road built between the light and the gloom, in the Being's darkness, in his deep intimacy, in the darkness of the meat and of the breathing, such is its essence.

Indefatigable, unalterable spirit, a developing and overpowering force that contains the mystery of all mysteries. That that penetrates, that can see, that smells of melancholy and distant horizons. Able to arise in any instant, in any place. Tremendously seductive, tremendously destructive. His body, intangible, small and fragile, hides his true power: the gift of the word, of the deceiving word that wraps us to each instant. He laughs continually, he laughs with his terrifying, contagious, magic, enchanting and fearsome smile. Divine spirit in freedom, there lies its power, that that the goddesses do not disdain when joyfully they lie in his bed. Because they can hardly resist him.

Son of Farbauti, (the inventor of fire) and of Laufey (the forest Island), he gets involved in a constant game of loyalty and of enmity with the other gods. Practically equal in importance to Odin, Loki frequently reminds him that he has not sworn him loyalty, but only "fraternity", and in fact, partner of adventures and misfortunes of Odin, many times he has drunk of the same glass that the divine sovereign, in a certain way, they are siblings and comrades, in fact, the siblings of Loki are Byleist (The destructive fire) and Helblinde (The fire that lights the spirit) who is none other than Odin. Elder Edda points out us an exchange of words between both gods after a banquet, there Loki uses its best weapon: the word that hides a meaning, the sentence that says a lot without saying enough, the word that can tie and chain:

"Do you remember Odin that in the dawn of times we mixed  
our blood?  
Then you assured you would never drink a drink  
If they didn't offer it to us both." (Niedner 1997: 200)

Blood unites and makes comparable the brotherhood from birth. It is the sacred and inviolable pact that generates obligations and loyalties, but for him, for whom morals do not exist, this can only bring him benefits, a situation privileged above the other gods. The luck accompanies him, he is always on the prowl, in the place and in the precise instant to deal the definitive blow and to disappear in the profitable instant. However, the necessity is reciprocal, Odin knows that he needs him, and continually he uses his amorality, that capacity he has to break the pacts without remorse, the freedom that grants the dishonor.

There resides his attractiveness, in spite of being a wicked entity, Loki is a tremendously captivating figure. His life is a constant mockery, he ridicules, he curses,

he plays jokes, and he emerges always victorious, but his essence is before anything the wickedness: he has given life to the most monstrous beings, to the wolf Fenrir that that will give death to Odín in the last battle and who devours the hand of Tyuz, the god of the war and the honor, and to the Snake that continually gnaws the roots of Ygdrasil, with the hidden hope of knocking down the cosmos, and to Hela, his daughter, the pale goddess of death. But he has also engendered Sleipnir, the horse of Odín. His dual character however, it is marked by a form of behaving very well defined, since he also is the teacher of the ambiguity. Pierre Grimal explains wisely to us that:

"Loki, as opposed to the gods, does not fear the great catastrophe foreseen by the prophets; on the contrary, the flame with his desires will triumph the day when the underneath powers will get unchained, the destructive demons; all the proud buildings of the gods will come undone, he will triumph that day in an explosion of demoniac laugh." (Grimal 1973, Vol II)

Not agreement exists about the meaning of his name that could well derive from Icelandic Luka (End), or of the term Logi (Fire), although it presents two variants, Utgard Loke that is the physical disease and Handle-Loke, the wicked essence, but whatever the case may be, all of them correspond to the symbolic meaning relative to the destruction caused by fire, either corporeal or spiritual.

In Loki lies the potential, latent destruction that awaits the precise moment to spread freely. His desire to take the ruin to the divine Kingdom, by means of the destruction that will carry his death - because the mythological Nordic system is so particular that it tells us about the fate of the gods - it shows us up the point to which its spirit is treacherous and disloyal. In the Twilight of the Gods, Loki will die, and nevertheless he wants that destruction, there resides his essence for in it lies his realization.

Often he faces the gods, and the stories have us used to this ambiguous character. Loki helps the gods whenever it is convenient for him, he betrays them when the opportunity presents itself. This fact, shows us the volatile character of fire, warm, cozy, element that provides security and light but which suddenly can turn into destruction and danger. The gods know about this inconsistency, but they do not reject him, it is so necessary sometimes to emerge triumphant of the unachievable pacts that many times they commit themselves, and that because of honor, they cannot undo but by means of deceit. Every time, Loki is there to help them out.

Often, he contrives pacts with the Giants, the eternal enemies of the divine race, many times he lends them a helping hand to the detriment of the divine interests, perhaps because his ambiguous essence and the wisdom that from it emanates, makes him realize that in spite of any thing, the end of all and everything is already written and nothing can change it. The Nornas plot, knit and blind the destiny, Odin has not even the power to contradict them.

However, Loki has a fatal enemy and it will be against him to whom he will direct his sword the last day in the final battle. To the darkness, to the shade that projects the fire and that eternally will accompany him, it opposes the light, the pure and total, radiant and celestial light: Heimdall (Hviti áss, "the innocent" god), the watcher of the gods who dwells in his radiant fortress in the end of Bifrost ("the road that trembles"), the rainbow that connects the world of the gods with the world of the humans:

"(...)the race of Bergelmer has multiplied and the giants have with whom to understand each other in the court of Odin. The god Loki plots with

them the ruin of the Aces. It is necessary that Heimdall, the most vigilant of the gods, be always awake mounted in the Rainbow with a trumpet in his hand, ready to call the Aces to the combat. He sleeps less than a bird and he can see the grass growing under his feet in the valleys." (Reinach 1944: 207)

Heimdall is Odin's son, born of nine virgin sisters, he is a very powerful and respected god since, in a way, the destiny of the gods resides in his vigilant eye that should be attentive in case the Giants try to climb Bifrost and arrive in Asgard. His horn of battle, Gjallar-horn can be listened in the whole cosmos, nevertheless, it must sound only in one occasion, when the decline is irremediable, when the destruction wraps the world. Elder Edda, in the singing of Grimner tells us that:

"It is in himminbjorg  
That Heimdall, it is said, inhabits and governs.  
There the guardian of the gods drinks happily the good mead  
In the old and gentle rooms." (Niedner 1997: 200)

The fight between both gods is the expression of the battle between the light and the darkness, and in the last of the days the Pure God will be able to give the blow of death to their declared enemy, but the victory will be momentary, because he will also succumb due to the received wounds, and this is because darkness does not exist without the light and vice versa, besides, is the unavoidable destiny that wraps with its halo the divine beings. But meanwhile, nothing frightens the restless spirit of Loki, neither the diligence nor the might of Heimdall are able to discourage him.

Adopting different forms, inclusive many times that of a woman, he is able to deceive the more meticulous surveillance, because he is also vigilant: on a mountain, he has a tower that serves him as observatory and from where he observes secretly the gods and the men, from there, he can learn all the weaknesses and the actions of his victims, because once he is aware of some weakness, he does not hesitate to use it to his advantage with the purpose of having a good time and winning something in return.

The bad actions in that he incurs are countless, and in each one of them it overflows his cunning, his malignancy and his special sense of humor, what makes him human and especially interesting.

Perhaps one of the most remembered episodes is the one in which, without any good reason, he cut the hair of the beautiful Sif, the wife of mighty Thor, although in that occasion it did not go very well, because the anger of Thor almost cost him his life, and he only saved it in exchange for promising a compensation: to forge a head of golden hair for Sif that would grow in a natural way. Obviously, and by force of persuasion, were the dwarves who ended up doing it, and at the same time, they built Skidbladnir, the ship of Odin and the lance of Gungnir. Both gifts that reconciled him with the Master of the Gods.

In spite of their differences, is not Heimdall who worries Loki the most, because in his soul he keeps a deep hate for Balder, who is destined to govern the world after the divine decline. In fact Loki was responsible for his death.

One day Balder comments to the other gods that he has had a terrible dream that vaticinated his death, they wonder horrified what they will do about it, for they love Balder. Odin listens in silence, because he knows that the greatness of the Aces goes hand in hand with the life of the gods. Then Frigga, the wife of Odin, finds the solution: they must exact from all things, alive and inanimate, an oath that none of them would

cause any damage to good Balder. The idea is accepted and Frigga travels the worlds taking the solemn promise: nothing will harm the god.

Intrigued, Loki wins the trust of Frigga and he asks her if truly all the things have promised not to damage Balder, and the goddess admits that only the mistletoe did not take the oath, because it seemed too feeble to cause him any damage. Immediately Loki begins to plot his plan.

Moments later, everybody gets together and amused themselves with using Balder as a target, because no matter how much they hurl darts at him or stroke him with their swords, nothing will harm him. Only Höeder, the blind god remains in a corner far from the crowd. Loki comes closer and asks him why he does not participate of the game, to what Höeder responds that he does not because he is blind and he does not have any weapons. Loki gives him an arrow and volunteers to aim, Höeder, blind as destiny, hurls the arrow and Balder falls down lifeless. A great silence travels through the room: the arrow is carved in a mistletoe twig, the gods shiver of fear and then of anger, but nothing can be done because Höeder is not to blame. Once again Loki disappears.

When the calm is restored, the solution emerges. They must ask Hela to bring back Balder, because since the god did not die in combat, his soul did not go to Valhalla, but rather to the kingdom of the dead. Hermod, one of the children of Odin, god of the courage and messenger of the gods, travels to Hell and meets with Hela and the goddess consents to return Balder if all things cry for his death. Everything weeps for Balder, the stones and the roses, the immobile air and the light, everything, except for a giantess named Thok. The gods ask her to weep for Balder the Good one, and she responds coldly:

"Thok will wail  
With dry tears  
For the death of Balder  
Neither in life nor in the death he has given me happiness.  
Let Hela keep her own." (Niedner 1997: 105.7, 121)

We have more than enough reasons to be sure that that giantess was none other than Loki himself. The gods suspected it but they could do nothing, the damage had already been done. All it could be done was to prepare for the great battle in that everything would finish: fearsome Ragnarok. The day that not even Odin himself knew with certainty.

For a while Loki did not turn up again, but the peace did not last long, because he reappeared, once the commotion had vanished. On a certain occasion, the gods celebrated a banquet in the fortress of Aeger, the Master of the Sea, and they were all invited except Loki. As expected, it did not take long for him to arrive requesting hospitality and food, something that the sacred laws forced to grant to anyone who requested it. Edda reminds us the persuasive words of Loki:

"Having been thirsty  
I have come to this palace  
I have taken a long trip to request the gods  
If they would allow me to have a sip of the valuable mead.  
Why are you so silent, gods?  
Why are you so obstinate?  
Have you lost the speech?  
Give me a seat and a place in the banquet  
Or throw me out." (Niedner 1997: 224)



The gods consented to receive him since nothing could be done. It was only a matter of time: once Loki sat down he began to speak badly of everyone. Nobody can respond, what he says is true, Gefione the Virgin goddess has gone to bed with more than only one, he has done it himself with the goddesses that attend the banquet. The moment becomes tense and beautiful Sif asks him to calm down and she offers him the divine drink, then Loki begins to say that she has also shared a bed with him and that she has given him her body. At that moment Thor appears, with the fury of the thunder, to defend the honor of his wife of the cruel slander. He tries to kill him, his anger is such that he does not respect the sacredness of the place, the other gods keep silent, because Loki deserves it without a doubt, but the God of the Fire cunningly is able to slip out his hands.

Then he takes refuge in the mountains and erects a fortress from which he can observe all surroundings, during the day, he turns into a salmon and hides in the water. However, nobody surpasses Odin in wisdom and power, and the father of the gods soon discovers his hideaway. Then they begin to prepare the expedition. In a moment of negligence, Loki knits a net to amuse himself, and he has fun in throwing it, then the gods arrive and Loki runs away, not before dropping the net in the fire, he turns into a salmon and by diving into the water he saves his life, but the gods have picked up the net from the fire and they realize it would be useful for capturing a fish. Immediately, the gods knitted a net and placed it in the course of the river.

Time and again Loki is able to avoid the net, in spite of the cunning of the gods that placed it time and again in the river in different places. Thor began to walk behind the net and the other gods advanced combing the water with it. Loki tried to leap over it and was captured by Thor. This way, Loki was made prisoner with his own trap, as the last of all his ironies. He was taken to a cavern and there he was tied with strings made with the bowels of his children. Later on, a snake was put on his face, so that the poison that flowed from its jaws would burn his face until the end of the days, when the chains are broken and Loki takes his place in the last of the battles, to kill and to lose his life, as everyone else, so that the world can be born again.

Nobody knows how long will it take for that moment to arrive, nobody, and although Odin sometimes rides hastily on the clouds with his ghastly army, and Thor delights himself in allowing the lightning and the thunder to strike the fields, that moment has not yet arrived. Loki still feels pain convulsions in the depths of the earth, and he trembles, making the surface to shake, he still remains chained, and wisdom is prisoner of the Kingdom of the death.

Perhaps, that last battle will never be carried out, we could not know it, we are a thousand years apart of that year one thousand, and things have changed significantly: the monks fell asleep waiting for the Christ, now they keep silence, and their scriptorium no longer provide books to life. Now, all it is left is to travel a little further on and to find the whisper of hidden divinity in the last corners, they still contain enough magic.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author is Licensed in History and Magister in European History by the University of Chile, and, at the moment he dictates the subject of Medieval and Modern History in the Bolivariana University of Chile. The author sincerely thanks for to Mr. Fernando Wladdimiro by his aid in the correction and translation of the present text.

<sup>2</sup> The *Eddas* are two important collections of Icelandic medieval mythological poems. *The old Edda*, also called *Elder* or *Poetic Edda* was written between the IX and XII centuries, and it was gathered by Saemund the Sage, it consists of 30 poems or songs where an account is given of the Nordic cosmogony. *New Edda*, also called *Younger* or *Prose Edda* was written by Snorri Sturluson in the XIII century, collecting a series of mythological Scandinavian stories.