

Giants in Teutonic Religion

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Summary: In Teutonic Pagan religion, there are different levels of functioning associated with giants as opposed to deities. The difference is that deities are much more conscious of the long run than are giants. Norse and English giants show the same general tendency to be unaware of the long run. For both Norse and English, giants tend to be hostile, but are not always so. The similarities and differences between the two Nordic systems imply distinct branches of Teutonic religion.

The present article has four major parts. First is a discussion of methodology. Second is a description of each type of giant in the Norse system and how they were regarded. Third is a description of giants in the English system. The last section presents conclusions.

Method and Context

The method used here is rooted in Jacob Grimm's approach (Stallybrass, 1966). Modern philology on the whole owes a lot to Jacob Grimm, although our scholarship had advanced since his day. Grimm was an etymologist, and etymology was the main thrust of his study of religion. His etymological work started with the premise that we can infer a non-observed language or dialect (such as Indo-European) based on existing languages and dialects. Therefore, by analogous inference we can reconstruct ancient religion based on observed superstitions, folk tales, myths, and other data to infer some of the native Pagan religious systems of Europe.

The present study focuses primarily on nonetymological data. Jacob Grimm was also an advocate of the folk tale in addition to etymological clues to religion. He emphasized that folk tales are our only source of knowledge of the Wild Hunt, and of Holda, Berchta, and Fricka. Modern scholars also like to use place names, verse, charms, legal documents, and archeological evidence.

It is logical to start with Norse religion and then ask if other branches of Germanic Paganism deviated from the Norse model. Mr. Grimm contended that just as Norse language is younger and purer than Modern German, so also Norse mythology that has survived is purer than surviving Germanic non-Norse religious lore. Most modern scholars would concur that the data on Norse religion give a more complete picture of Pagan religions and show a more Pagan society than do data from other Germanic societies.

This approach does not produce a single model of Teutonic religion. Jacob Grimm pointed out

that just as Germanic languages show much variety in dialect from one district or region to another, so Germanic religion must have shown much variety from one district or region to another. For example, consider the sibling deities Frey and Freya. In Old High German, there is a feminine noun *frouwa*, in Gothic there is the masculine *frouja* (lord), and in Old Saxon *froho* or *fro*, “so that the Goths and Saxons seem to have preferred the god, High Germans the goddess; in the North both Freyr and Freyja are honored alike” (Stallybrass, 1966). Another example: Holda was a regional deity known outside of Scandinavia. However, Norse lore of Frigga can be used to put Holda in a context and contribute to understanding of Her (Gundarsson, 1993a: 47-50).

Types of Norse Giants

There are five types of giant in the Old Norse language. In predominately Pagan times there were the *þurs*, *jötunn*, *gýgr*, and *norn*. During predominately Christian times there were also the *risi* and *troll*. Motz (1987) and Gundarsson et al (1993a) say that the Norse of ancient times used their words for giant “fairly interchangeably”. However, the categories do show some distinctions.

ÞURS

Regarding these wights, there is a high level of agreement. Þursar are enemies of the deities and relatively unintelligent. Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie (Cleasby et al, 1957) tell us that in the surviving Old Norse literature, “þurs” refers to a being notable for surliness and stupidity. They also emphasize that Thor is the mortal enemy of þursar. Zoëga (1910) emphasizes the enmity between þursar and deities when he tell us that Thor is called “þursa raðbani” — killer of giants. More recent scholars go beyond the dictionaries. Using mythic sources, Thorsson (1987: 176, 188-189) tells us that a þurs is a wight of great age, but marked by stupidity and by hostility toward deities, at least toward Asgardian deities. Gundarsson (1993a: 116-117) agrees with Thorsson, adding that þursar are “elemental” wights, such as cliff-giants or rime-giants. (Rime is an opaque coating of granular ice).

JÖTUNN

The *jötunn* vary greatly in more than one dimension. In the surviving Old Norse literature, “*jötunn*” is used both as a term for a specific type of giant and as a generic label for the whole species (Motz, 1987). As a specific type of giant, the *jötunar* partially overlap deities’ jurisdictions — but not their functions.

Despite the variety among *jötunar*, none of them was quite as good as a deity -- in any sense of “good”. The difference in mental level means that deities can be our friends, but *jötunar* are at best useful allies and at worst simply ogres. This is supported by the very low esteem for giants in surviving Old Norse literature. For example, in *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri tells that men may be referred to with names of gods as praise, but that use of *jötunn* names implies insult

(Faulkes, 1987: 94; Kaske, 1967).

Jötnar Compared to Deities

The categories of jötunn and deity are quite distinct despite the overlaps in jurisdiction and intellectual capacity. *Vafþrúnistmal* (Strophe 16) tells us that the realms of deities and jötnar are separated by a river that never freezes, and therefore never provides a broad bridge to allow free intercourse (Larrington, 1996: 42; Thorsson, 1993: 22, 23). This symbolizes the fact that although deities and giants may interact and their jurisdictions overlap, the differences in function are very significant.

Overall Character of Jötnar

Jötunar vary greatly in mental functioning. Ymir, who never attained the slightest level of awareness, was a jötunn. On the other hand, in the mythic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, Vafþrúðnir lost his quiz game against Óðin only because Óðin was able to ask the jötunn for one of His own secrets. Some Jötnar learn but do not creatively adapt. Gundarsson et al tell us that jötnar are able to breed with Asgardian deities and to function on the Æsir's level as regards "wisdom". Gundarsson et al mean "knowledge". The present author has found no legend of jötunn breeding with humans. (See Cleasby et al, 1957; Gundarsson et al, 1993a; Hodge, 1998; Larrington, 1996: 3-60; Thorsson, 1987)

Jötunar are sometimes said to vary greatly in physical size, but the variation can be exaggerated. Jötunar are various sizes of gigantic. Thorsson (1987) tells us that a jötunn might be as small as a beetle or as "vast as the worlds". Nowhere in the sagas nor Eddas is a giant described as tiny. Nor is any giant as vast as all or any of the worlds. We can be sure that Ymir's skull was *magically* enlarged to form the sky, for if Ymir's skull were large enough to form the sky when Ymir lived, it would have been far out of proportion to the amount of Ymir's blood (the sea), his flesh (soil), his hair (trees), his bones (barren hills or rocks) or his brains (the clouds). (See Hollander, 1962: 46; Young, 1954: 35-36). It is probably an message of Teutonic religion that no wight is as big as all reality or is a major chunk of physical reality. Gundarsson adds that jötnar are skilled in magic (Gundarsson, 1993a).

Thorsson (1987) also us that some jötnar side with the Æsir and some with the Þurses. For example, in *Hymiskviða* (*Hymir's Poem*) the jötunn Ægir brews ale (albeit reluctantly) for the deities, but the jötunn Hymir is an enemy from whom a couple of the gods steal a cauldron.

GÝGR

This word appears in *Hymiskviða* (strophe 14), where it clearly refers to a giantess. It also appears in *Hel Reið Brynhildar* (*Brynhild's Ride to Hel*), where the giantess in question is "ór steini" (from the rock — she is a rock giantess). The giantess in *Hel Reið Brynhildar* has enough dialog with Brynhild that we discern the giantess' mental character. She is quite knowing but not perceptive, for she has knowledge of Brynhild's life, but has not gotten the whole story or has not gotten it straight. The implication is that a gýgiar might have empirical, extra-sensory, or otherwise unusual knowledge. Nevertheless, such a being is not a good source of information.

These wights are also always associated with hostility toward characters we regard as

sympathetic. For example, in *Hel Reið Brynhildar* the giantess is definitely hostile toward the heroine. In *Voluspá* a “gýgiar hirðir” (giantess’ herdsman) is happy that giants are assaulting Asgarð during Ragnarok. (See Neckel, 1936a; Larrington, 1996).

NORN

Norns appear to be metaphors for the production of circumstances that defy empirical explanation and moral justification. Norns are the most powerful of wights but uniformly unaware of themselves or what they are doing.

The three norns of Asgarð originate among the Þursar, but norns are a type of giant unto themselves. Unlike Þursar, norns are not inherently friendly nor hostile. Instead, norns are too unaware to be friendly or hostile. In *Miðgarð*, the lesser norns attached to individual humans might be more or less beneficial in nature, but their tendencies also do not result from conscious decision making (Young, 1954, Stanfield, 2000e).

Norns have nothing to say. In the high myths, folk tales, and sagas no one ever asks the norns for advice about the past nor the future. This is despite stories in which female wights are asked for accounts of the past, present, or future.

However, norns produce circumstances within which both people and deities must operate. The myths and sagas are clear that deities and people cannot alter, predict, nor explain nornic circumstances. One must have inner strength to emotionally withstand such situations and resourcefulness to handle them.

RISI

While it is possible that the word “risi” does not originate in Pagan times, it is certainly not Christian. Regarding risar, there is great disagreement. What is clear is that risar are a lower form of wight than are deities, and that risi mental functioning is not impressive.

The most important Pagan authors seem to have taken slightly different views, but agree that risar are friends of Mankind. Thorsson (1987) says that risar are very large, friendly to humans, physically beautiful, and pleasant company for deities. He adds that they intermarry with humans and bear their children. Kveldulf Gundarsson (1993a) says that risar are mountain giants, inherently unintelligent, and that they may occasionally be helpful to humans.

However, in the *Prose Edda*, we are told that when the Æsir recognized that the wight who helped them fortify Asgard was a mountain giant, they felt not compelled to keep their promises of wages. They had the laborer killed instead. Elsewhere in the *Prose Edda*, Thor is called a trouble-worsener of mountain giants, which definitely implies animosity (Faulkes, 1987: 35-36, 84).

The major dictionaries also disagree. Zoëga defined risi as a type of giant comparable to trolls, who are enemies of mankind. Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie failed to find “risi” anywhere in the surviving Old Norse documents. Neckel listed “risi” in his glossary to the *Poetic Edda*, defining that word simply as Modern German “riese”. “Riese” has no more

negative connotations than does our Modern English “giant”. “Risi” is used in Modern Icelandic to mean “giant”. (See Cleasby and Vigfusson, 1957; Taylor, 1990; Neckel, 1936a, 1936b; Zoëga, 1910)

It would have been much more helpful if the prominent experts would have explained why they differ. Thorsson’s view may be based partly on evidence from *Bard’s Saga*, for in that story a character named Dumb was descended from risar on his father’s side and trolls on his mother’s side, and was good-looking, helpful to humans, and able to breed with women. (See S. Anderson, 1997a; Bjarnasson, 2000; Motz, 1987). However, the story does not say that Dumb was a risi. In Nordic religion, giant parentage does not a giant make. For example, some of the deities are of giant parentage.

Lotte Motz, in an overall review of giants and trolls in Old Norse, concludes that risi “came late into Scandinavian speech and did not denote a truly ancient spirit”. The editor of *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders* agrees with Motz that the term “risi” was “coined when the old beliefs were fading”. Perhaps modern Pagan scholars are right to include “risi” as a Pagan term. New words are coined all the time in living languages, and it is possible that Pagan innovations occurred in times of Christian dominance without showing reactions to Christianity. Therefore, it does not matter for present purposes if this word “came late into Scandinavian speech.” (Hreinsson et al, 1997c: 409-410; Motz, 1987).

TROLL

The editorial team of *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders* inferred that trolls were not giants in Pagan times. Instead, they were evil spirits residing in rocks and wild areas and having small anthropomorphic bodies like those of dark elves. Thus, the trolls Lottie Motz writes of in his classic study of giants characterize “later medieval times”.

Trolls are very magical and usually hostile to mankind. In exceptional episodes, they are loyal to humans, sometimes against other trolls. Good will, cleverness, and highly conscious self-control are not characteristic of trolls, who are as lower animals with magical skills. (See Hreinsson et al, 1997c, Kroesen, 1996; Motz, 1987).

THE QUESTION OF WORSHIP OF NORSE GIANTS

Despite the variety among Norse giants, they differ from deities in one critical way. Giants are never depicted as having a high degree of conscious self-control . They exert little or no conscious control over short-term events, and they exert no control over the long term. It is unusual that giants do humans any good, and some of them are hostile. In contrast, deities commonly exert conscious control and can be asked to favor people.

Conscious and Active Control

One way that giants are associated with natural forces or events is by “personifying” such

forces or events, while deities control or mitigate. Examples of this can be found in the *Eddas*. For example, the giant Logi *is* wildfire but the god Njörð stills fire. Another example: the giant Elli *is* old age, but the god of health and strength (Þórr) slows down its onset (See Gundarsson, 1993a; Karlsdóttir et al, 1993; Young, 1954: 51, 77, 78).

Another function of giants is to automatically cause. Thus, Vindlóni (Wind-Cool) is the (automatic) father of winter, but several deities could be called upon to mitigate weather for human benefit. A giant called Svásuð (Agreeable) is the father of summer, which comes relentlessly year after year. In the *OERP Book*, Stanfield (2000a) argues that Night and Day are giants. (See also the sidebar, “Sun and Moon”).

Even when standing outside natural forces and not acting as automatons, giants show a remarkable lack of consciousness. For example, the Norns of Asgarð create circumstances for divinities and others without the slightest idea of what they have done, are doing, or will do. In contrast, the gods and goddesses of Asgarð consciously adapt, respond, argue, discuss, plan, and review. (See Young, 1954; Larrington, 1996; Stanfield, 2000e; Turville-Petre, 1964).

Alleged Exceptions -- Skaði and Mímir

Giants were not objects of cults. This issue is important because if giants were the objects of cults and were given sacrifices, then conscious favorable intervention in long- or short-term would be implied. Some scholars contend that two giants were worshipped. The “giants” in question are Skaði and Mímir. (See Gundarsson, 1993; Gundarsson et al, 1993a; Karlsdóttir et al, 1993; Stead, 1994; see also the sidebar, “Sacrifices in Sagas”).

Skaði

Place-name evidence implies that Skaði was worshipped in several places in Scandinavia. However, Skaði was not a giant.

Snorri repeatedly labels Skaði as a goddess, despite Her residence of origin in Þrymheim and Her giant parentage. The Teutonic Pagans did not classify wights strictly on the basis of ancestry. Many of Asgarð’s deities have jötunn ancestry. It is how a wight acts that makes the difference between giant and deity in Teutonic Paganism. (See Faulkes, 1987: 24, 75; Larrington, 1996: 270; Turville-Petre, 1964; Young, 1954: 51-52).

One clue to Skaði’s status as a goddess is the treatment she receives in the story of Thiazi in the *Skáldskaparmál* (Young, 1954: 97-100). That is, her treatment by the deities is respectful, she is allowed to join the community of deities, and we are subtly invited to sympathize with her.

Skaði is a goddess of bow and arrow use, skiing, snowshoes, and hunting. She is a loyal daughter and the only warrior female in the pantheon.

Mimir

“Mímir” refers to at least two distinct mythic beings, one a giant and one a god. In the days before surnames and middle names, Europeans had to accept that as a matter of course different people would have the same name. By analogy, they would have tolerated very different mythic wights (or objects) having the same name much more easily than do modern

persons.

Several scholars opine that the same Mímir who was sent to the Vanir as a hostage from Asgard was a giant. This is rather unlikely. Certainly, a giant would not have been a credible hostage sent to the Vanir. Therefore mention of Mímir as a giant's name in *Skaldskaparmál* raises the possibility of two quite different wights under the same name (Faulkes, 1987: 84, 155). It is also possible that Mímir the god was transformed from a giant in some shamanic or puberty myth now lost.

Snorri specifically lists "Mímir" in his discussion of ambiguous words. Furthermore, other mythic names were duplicated. Examples follow. Þekk (Known) is the name of a dwarf listed in strophe 12 of *Voluspá* and one of the names of Oðin listed in strophe 46 of *Grimnismál*. Draupnir is both a wight (soil-dwelling dwarf) and Oðin's magic gold ring. Faulkes' index of names in the *Prose Edda* indicates other examples of duplicated names, including Atli, Bragi, and Dag. (See Faulkes, 1987:17, 50 155, 229-259; Hollander, 1962).

However, it is still possible to create an argument that at least some Scandinavians sacrificed in fear of giants. Motz (1987) claims that in *Jomsvikings Saga*, Earl Harald sacrifices to a giant, but Hollander says the "giant" is Harald's "patron goddess". In Chapter 4 of *Bardar Saga Snælfellsáss*, a group of men sacrifice "for good luck" at a place later called "Troll Church" (S. Anderson, 1997a), so they might have sacrificed to trolls; but it is also possible been tententiously renamed by Christians. Christians did sometimes insist that pre-Christian religion was worship of "devils". Kroesen (1996) infers that people sacrificed to giants to get them to leave humans alone, but not to praise nor ask for positive deeds.

Sun and Moon

There is no folkloric nor place-name evidence that the Norse worshipped the sun nor the moon. Nevertheless, there is evidence in the Prose Edda to be considered.

In the *Gylfanning*, we are told that Mani (Moon), who was apparently a human son, was exiled to the sky because his father married his sister Sól (Sun) to Glen. Moon now "governs the journeying of the moon and also its waxing and waning" (Young, 1954: 38, 61). This penal chore would be pretty menial, since the moon is extremely predictable in its actions. Although the Prose Edda does not explicitly indicate that Moon is a giant, the inference seems quite clear. Moon is accompanied by Bil and Hjuki, who are children, but "Sól and Bil are reckoned among the goddesses." Perhaps the goddess Bil has functions appropriate to her mobile locus in the sky, such as helping small children to sleep when they are afraid. Sól's divine status simply contradicts my theory, for her duty is to drive the vehicle of the sun, and this is similar to Mani's tedious and highly repetitive job. However, most bodies of religious literature have at least minor inconsistencies.

THE QUESTION OF FÍFL

Old Norse "fífl" refers to a fool, clown, or boor. The Old Norse word also refers to giants in the expression "fífl megir" (fools' sons) in a strophe of *Voluspá*, where it implies the witlessness of the giants who attack Asgarð in Ragnarok. However, this does not necessarily mean that a fífl is a giant. Dronke renders "fífils" as "giants" and Neckel renders it as "monsters" in

disagreement with Cleasby et al. However Dronke and Neckel seem to be interpreting only in terms of context in *Voluspa*, while Cleasby et al seem to be using a wider range of evidence. (See Cleasby et al, 1957; Hollander, 1964: 10, strophe #50; Neckel, 1936a and 1936b; Zöega, 1910).

Types of English Giants

Early medieval Anglo-Saxons used seven terms to refer to “giant”: ent, eoten, gigant, þyrs, the one-of-a-kind Metod, fifel and nicoras. As is the case with the Norse, none of the English giants is a wight who might have been worshipped or prayed to for positive deeds. As is the case with the Norse, the English giants are not all hostile. And in the English system, giants have lower levels of mental functioning than do deities or people.

ENT

Definition

The dictionaries of Old English simply define “ent” (nominative plural entas) as “giant”, but the data they cite give a fuller picture. Entas call our attention to a distinction between technical progress and building for the future. They symbolize beings who were very efficacious but who left no intellectual nor moral legacy. (See Bosworth and Toller, 1898; 1921; Hall, 1960; Healy et al, 1996).

An ent was a large, physically strong, and skillful being of ancient times. Entas were creative and capable of doing things beyond known human capacities, but they were not magicians. Entas were not destructive – just the opposite. They were associated with stone works and other impressive physical products. Entas were vaguely human-like, but not necessarily beautiful, ugly, nor somewhere in between. In every use of “ent” but one, the ent or entas written of passed away long before the story occurs. The one exception is the reference to Goliath (discussed below).

Examples

“Enta geweorc” is a stock phrase, found frequently in Old English poetry to describe stone works which the early medieval Anglo-Saxons did not know how to build. An illustrative example is in *The Ruin*. As the narrator views an ancient Roman city, he or she reflects that it was once filled with human lives and joys, tragedies and treasures, sounds and emotions. The city that once stood so usefully is “enta geweorc” (giants’ work). In Maxims II, Lines 2-4, among the truths-by-definition listed is this: “Cities are...skillful *enta geweorc*...”. These wights were also builders of dykes and mounds (Bosworth and Toller, 1898; Mitchell and Robinson, 1992: 253; Owen, 1985; Rodrigues, 1993).

So this is an ethically neutral category of wight. Some, but not everything the entas made was beneficial to mankind. For example, in Lines 2715-2719 of Alexander’s (1995) edition of

Beowulf, the underground hall where the evil dragon resided is called “enta geweorc”.

These wights might have been ethically neutral, but they were not menacing. The only association of “ent” with combat is in Lines 2976-2981 of Alexander’s (1995) edition of *Beowulf*, where a thegn attacks swinging an “eotenisc” sword and wearing an “entiscne helm” (ent-ish helmet). The contrast between the sword as an offensive weapon and the helmet as defensive armor is significant. Entas did not make offensive weapons.

Translations from Other Ancient Literature

Parallels recognized by native speakers of Old English help to reveal the meaning of “ent”, although these parallels were probably not exact. In cases where the early medieval Anglo-Saxons were trying to find a word to refer to beings in another culture’s mythology or folklore, the translators were probably trying to find as close a correspondence as possible.

“Ent” was used to translate “Cyclops”, the builders of ancient, ruined cities. For awhile after the fall of Mycenaean and Minoan civilizations, the inhabitants of Greece did not see how people could build those large stone halls, city walls, bridges, and paved roads. Cyclops were said to have built those things and to have had talents as smiths. The catch is that Cyclops have a menacing aspect as characters in *The Odyssey* and as relatives of titans, enemies of the Greek deities. Also the Cyclops gave Zeus the thunderbolt as an offensive weapon, and entas did not “geweorc” offensive weapons. (See Barr, 1961: 27-28, 31; Durant, 1939; Graves, 1960: 31-33, 37, 40, 83, 122, 151, 238, 241-242; Healey et al, 1996; Lévêque, 1964: 46; Rees, 1991).

Like the uses of “ent” to refer to Greek beings, references to Old Testament characters show approximation as opposed to exact translation. In *Genesis*, Chapter 6 Verse 4, ent was used to translate “Nephalim”, beings of great size and strength, long-gone “men of renown”. Nephalim were descended from “sons of heaven” and human women. Scholars speculate that the Nephalim were supposed to have constructed megalithic structures in Palestine that seemed to the ancient Jews as beyond known human capability. In *Genesis*, Chapter 10 Verses 8-13, Nimrod was “the first potentate” and a builder of cities. Wulfstan used the focal word in his version of Palestinian history: “Nimrod and the entas made the wonderful tower.” In *1 Samuel*, Chapter 17, Goliath is presented as a Philistine, born in the Philistine’s capitol city where he grew to be a very large man. Goliath was characterized as an ent in the Old English translation. (See Barker et al, 1985; Bosworth and Toller, 1898; 1921; Catholic Church, 1987).

The semidivine origin of the Nephalim and the unequivocally human origin of Goliath differ from the nontranslating use of “ent”, where we do not see any origin of entas. Also untypical is that Goliath is spoken of as alive and that he is an enemy of human protagonists while he is an ally of human villains. In native Old English literature, Entas do not take sides for or against humans.

These translation uses of “ent” tend to support what we see in non-translation uses. “Ent” in translations refers to very high-level capacity for mundane achievement. This achievement is based on high levels of muscle or technical skill, but is not magic. In translation uses, entas do not consciously leave a moral or intellectual legacy for future generations of any wight.

EOTEN

“Eoten” denotes a metaphor for an ancient and tragic tendency. This word was used in poetry only. The dictionaries define eoten unequivocally as a villain: a giant, monster, ogre, or enemy. Every use of the focal term that the present author found and every derivation or compound word implies an enemy of mankind. A typical example of an eoten is Grendel. (See Hall, 1960; Bosworth and Toller, 1898; 1921; Healey et al, 1996).

An interesting use of the focal concept is in the poetic stock phrase “eald-sweard eotenisc”. An example is in Lines 2977-2980 of Alexander’s (1995) edition of *Beowulf*, where a soldier moves to rescue a fallen comrade: “Where his brother lay, Higelac’s thegn with broad sword made his old-sword eoten-ish and his ent-ish helmet break through the shield wall.” The action is taken by a sympathetic character, but the reference is to the regrettable and ancient tragedy of warfare as a practically universal human institution.

There are two instances of “eoten” in *Beowulf* which some scholars have interpreted as “Jute”. However, Kaske (1967) has made a convincing case that the Jutes never appear in *Beowulf*, and that the uses in question refer to Frisians in a pejorative sense. Kaske points out that this parallels use of “jötunn” and names of specific jötunnar in Old Norse.

There is not an Old English word that is a synonym of “jötunn”. A misconception which is implied by some modern literature is that “etin” is a Modern English word derived from eoten and meaning the same as “jötunn”. The word “etin” became obsolete a few centuries ago and seems to have been revived with a revised meaning late in the Twentieth Century. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “etin” simply as “giant”, the examples given from the years 1205-1611 show an unequivocally negative concept — in line with the idea of eoten and out of line with jötunn (Oxford University Press, 1933).

GIGANT

This is also a hostile being. Hall (1960) and Bosworth-Toller (1898; 1921) define this word simply as “giant”. However, the examples they cite show no pleasant connotations, and the word shows up in Lines 111-113 in *Beowulf* in a list of monsters hostile to people (Alexander, 1995). In the surviving literature, they are remarkable neither for stupidity nor for cunning.

ÞYRS

This Old English dictionaries define this word as (A) “giant, demon” or (B) “enchanter, sorcerer, wizard”. Any giant þyrs would have been hostile to people. The magician þyrs might or might not have been hostile. There is no implication of stupidity nor of shrewd planning on the part of any þyrs.

“Þyrs” is a cognate of “þurs” in Old Norse. However, these cognate words do not carry the same meaning. Complicating things further, “þurs” in Old English has practically the opposite referent of the identical word in Old Norse, since “þurs” in Old English is the possessive of

Thor's name.

Þyrs as Human Magician

Let us first consider the definition of þyrs as “enchanter, sorcerer”. In a minor codex, the focal word is used to translate a Latin word referring to wizards, sorcerers, or magicians. In turn, the expressions translated refer to an ethnic stereotype of the Marsi, an ancient people of South Central Italy. It is not clear whether the stereotype is negative or positive. Þyrs in this sense occurs only when paired with “snake charmer”. It is possible that a snake charmer would have been viewed as either a menace or a great benefit to others — or perhaps as both. Of course the scale of the Marsi is human rather than gigantic (Bosworth and Toller, 1898; Glare, 1976).

Þyrs as Giant

This more common usage of þyrs presents a nasty image. For example, in *Beowulf*, Grendel is a þyrs as well as an eoten (Alexander, 1995: see line 426 regarding “þyrs” and 761 regarding “eoten”). But þyrs also was used to denote “Cyclops” — as we have seen above, Cyclops were not necessarily evil. The focal word was also used to translate the Latin “colossi” (denoting a larger-than-life statue).

From the strictly native use in *Beowulf* and *Maxims II*, we see that a þyrs would have been a water-loving wight. These giants would not necessarily have resided inside a body of water, but would have preferred to lurk near water. Place names also provide clues. Owen claims to have found three places named after þyrs. (1) It is possible that Thursford was named after Thor and that the name alludes to his inability to walk across Bifrost. (2) On the other hand, Tasmere (þyrs-mere) strongly suggests a giant's habitat. (3) Owen says that Thirsqueche means “þyrs thicket”, and this would indicate a difficult place to enter or navigate (perhaps on dry land, perhaps in a marsh). (See Owen, 1985; Rodrigues, 1993: Lines 43-44; Young, 1954).

It would have been quite out of character for Pagan English people to have celebrated a þyrs. There is no indication of a þyrs-town, -hamlet, or -farmstead, although human home places were named for deities (such as Woden-town, Wednesbury).

METHOD

Among English Pagans, Metod was allegory for the origins of wyrd. Metod is one-of-a-kind in the English system, and he corresponds to the all the norns in the Norse system – both those of Asgarð and those of individual persons.

In the *OERP Book*, Stanfield (2000a and e) presents the philological justification for this view of Metod. Following are the highlights of Stanfield's argument.

We must first realize how the ancient English defined wyrd. The word had several meanings, as do many modern English words, but the focus here is on a “philosophically interesting” meaning.

There are unavoidable circumstances in every human life that have etiologies that are not

empirically accountable and that cannot be justified morally. Wyrð is the power of such circumstances or the circumstances per se. Face with wyrð, you must cope. “Wyrð” is used to translate “fatum”, but it is only an approximation, for wyrð is circumstance (or the power of certain circumstances) and not outcome. (Except that wyrð sometimes denotes death.) The concept of wyrð acknowledges that life does not have to be completely fair and does not have to always make sense. Many surviving uses of wyrð show this, including an explicit philosophical discussion by Alfred.

Like norns, Metod has supreme (but not unlimited) power. Also like the norns, Metod is ethically neutral and lacking in awareness of what he is doing or has done or will do. He is the origin of the most exciting, thrilling, and growth-potential things that occur, but also the origin of horrible disasters. He sends us light to enjoy and danger to fear.

In mixed-faith literature Metod sometimes appears as an aspect of Yahweh. This would be because the syncretic religionists of the time could not deny the existence of wyrð but could not allow Yahweh to be limited. So they made a chimera. However, some uses of Metod do not necessarily refer to him as an aspect of any other being.

Some authorities translate Metod as “The Creator”, but the giant—even as an aspect of Yahweh—never appears as a creator of anything but wyrð. In mixed-faith literature, Metod appears in connection with desperate or disastrous situations. Metod is never associated with willful mercy, compassion, nor salvation. Nor is hatred nor willful mischief attributed to him.

Metod is not one to ask for assistance or advice. In those desperate situations where we see Yahweh as Metod, adherents of Biblical religions often pray to Yahweh or one of His saints for assistance, salvation, wisdom, or courage. No one ever prays to Metod for anything. For example, you can see this in lines 2524b-2527a of *Beowulf*, where Beowulf and his opponent have to each find their own inner strength for the combat.

The name is another clue that Metod is not a deity. His name is “The Allotted” (acted upon) not “The Allotor” (actor), and this emphasizes that he is not consciously doing things. The name “Allotted” corresponds to the Scandinavian notion that children are allotted norns at birth. That is, Metod is the wight allotted to each person, and he works differently for each of us. Like the Old Norse literature, the Old English literature does not say who does the allotting.

The mixed-faith literature implies ethical neutrality by mentioning circumstances created by Metod without indicating justification. This holds whether it is the light of day (as in strophe 24 of the *Old English Rune Poem*) or the drifter’s personal woes in *The Wanderer*. Consider an appearance of Metod in clearly Christian literature. In lines 104-108 of *The Seafarer* (Mitchell and Robinson, 1994), the workings of Metod build character. The notion that all hardship exists to test or build our character and is necessary for that purpose is theodicy. In these lines of the *Seafarer*, we see an almost Pagan attitude in Christian propaganda, for we are not told that hardship or death is moral. Instead, we are told that some learn from Metod’s challenges and some do not. In this instance, what some learn is to adhere to Yahweh. Theodicy is not offered, for these circumstances merely exist.

FÍFEL AND NICOR

Fífelas and nicras are giants much like norns or Metod, but with far less power and philosophical significance. Fífelas and nicras have no dialog and no complex, human-like motivation to make them empathic. Very unlike norns and Metod, fífelas and nicras do have emotion: hatred of mankind.

Fífelas and nicras have other traits in common: they like water, be it a shallow marsh or a deep ocean. “Water monster” is a better translation than the dictionaries’ “sea monster”. Fífelas and nicras also live exclusively in wilderness. “Nicor” was used to denote “hippopotamus” and “walrus”, which are very large, water-loving animals. Although hippos are vegetarians, they are often aggressively hateful to people who venture among them.

Fífelas are definitely associated with giants in *Beowulf*, in line 104. The context shows how persons became giants and had to live in the waste regions. Another example of the use of fífel is in the poem *Waldere*, at the start of Part II. In that passage a hero releases another man from imprisonment, and to escape they must hasten through a place dominated by these monsters. The Norse/Icelandic cognate for fífel (fifl) implies enough mental functioning to be a fool, but the Old Norse noun does not denote a giant. (See: Bosworth and Toller 1898; Chickering 1977; Hall, 1960; Rodrigues, 1993: 84).

Conclusions Regarding Lore of Giants

Similarities between the Old Norse and Old English systems imply different denominations or styles of Teutonic Paganism.

SIMILARITIES

In both Norse and English systems, giants are physically large and have great powers of various sorts. Churlishness is their second most common characteristic, but true giants are not just hostile predators. Sometimes here is something about giants that invites our empathy without inviting significant sympathy. They may be written of as “men” or “women”, as are deities, even if the giants in question lack the slightest degree of consciousness. On the other hand, some giants are simply hostile monsters without personalities and with no profit in preying on people. They sometimes side with heroes. In both systems, some types of giants have magical powers. Some, but not all giants in both systems show non-magical or magical abilities to do very constructive deeds.

Giants are separated from deities mainly by the giants’ lack of highly-developed consciousness and self-control. Because of their lack of conscious self-control, their control of other things is not volitional. Thus, the seasons practically always appear or *wyrd* may be used to refer to sheer chance.

Some giants are never constructive, but those who are constructive never do themselves nor their kind any long-run good. Their gains are in the short run. Any true cleverness on the part of giants other than *entas* is in playing games or in hostile action.

Although Old Norse sources indicate giants who mingled with the deities of Asgarð, myths tell us that in the Norse system even the deities could not bridge the gap between divine and giant cultures. Likewise in the ancient English view, most giants were quite separate from people and deities. As a result of this gap, even the most constructive and friendly of giants are eligible at best for admiration but not for worship.

Both Norse and English giants include a type that produces a certain type of circumstance (or the power of such circumstances). The existence of norns and the Metod type of giant implies a major difference between Teutonic polytheism and Abrahamic religion. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam an all-powerful and all-knowing deity rules alone. In Teutonic polytheism, no conscious wight nor combination of conscious wights knows all or has supreme power, and the deities live in communities. The power of the conscious wights is limited by a greater might which has no will.

DIFFERENCES

None of the terms for giant in Old Norse maps exactly to a term in Old English, despite some approximations. The Old Norse þurs and Old English þyrs have similar names, and the þursar relate to gods and goddesses as þyrs relate to humans, but the Old English þyras were not so especially noted for stupidity as were their Old Norse kin. Jötunar and eotenas differ in that some of the jötnar are at least reluctant helpers of people's deities, while eotenas are always hostile. In the Norse system, no type of giant was as constructive as the entas and skilled work was in the jurisdiction of dwarves (after the coming of the norns). The line between ent-kind and mankind was less distinct in the English system than was the line between jötunar and humans or deities in the Old Norse system. The norns and Metod perform practically the same function, but they differ in form and number. Also, the circumstances that the norns and Metod produce are described with different metaphors.

A CAUTION

The Norse lore used here is primarily mythological, relating giants to deities but not to humans. The English lore is exclusively folklore, and relates giants to humans but not to deities. Therefore, if there is a philosophical contrast between high deity lore and folklore, that disjunction will be part of the contrast between the English and Norse data.

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The giants of the pre-Christian mythology and religion of the Norse and other Germanic peoples are a tribe of spiritual beings whose power equals that of the two tribes of gods, the Aesir and the Vanir. Their character, however, is very different from that of the gods and, in fact, the giants and the gods correspond to opposing, but intertwined, cosmological principles. The Devourers. "Giants" is a misleading Anglicization of the name of these beings. Looking for more great information on Norse mythology and religion? While this site provides the ultimate online introduction to the topic, my book *The Viking Spirit* provides the ultimate introduction to Norse mythology and religion period. I've also written a popular list of *The 10 Best Norse Mythology Books*, which you'll probably find helpful in your pursuit. Religion of Storm Giants (Norse/Teutonic paganism) . Published by Marvel; from *Journey Into Mystery* (vol. 1) #100 (Jan. 1964): The Storm Giants. Religion: Norse/Teutonic paganism. Name: Storm Giants. Other Names: Giants of Jotunheim. Classification: villains group. Publisher(s) Teutonic Mythology is composed of a body of myths (stories encompassing "popular ideas on natural or supernatural and social phenomena") based on the religion of the ancient Teutons, a group comprised by Germans, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, Goths and other Northern European peoples. Haha Funny Funny Memes Jokes Funny Stuff Random Stuff That's Hilarious Funny Videos Demotivational Posters Just For Laughs. SciFi, Los Angeles, CA. 62K likes. Stephen Hunt's fans examine SCIFI, fantasy & his books in the genre. More at www.amazon.com/author/stephenhunt & Celtic Mythology Celtic Goddess Triple Goddess Goddess Art Sacred Feminine Divine Feminine Moon Magic Gods And Goddesses Samhain. reclaimingthedarkgoddess. Elli is the Teutonic goddess of old age.