

How I Got to Know Jarnsaxa

by Alice Karlsdottir

Many Norse Pagan groups have a pantheon chock full of robust, manly Gods, but only a smattering of ill-defined Goddesses. This is not, as many Craft people have intimated to me, because Norse folk are inherently more chauvinistic or macho-mad than other Pagans. Rather, there is simply a decided dearth of material on the Norse Goddesses. Of many, only the names remain.

If one is an archaeologist or medieval historian, the matter would have to die there. But Paganism is more than history -- it is a religion. No religion practices rituals in exactly the same form that they were done in 300 years ago. Religion, to be viable, must grow and expand. Besides, much of the old Norse lore was passed on orally, and many of the Norse Pagans passed on prematurely when the Christians moved in, so just because we can't find much material on the Goddesses does not mean they weren't worshipped. To the contrary, assuming that a religion reflects the culture it grew from and judging from what we know of Norse society, women played a strong role; therefore, it makes sense that the female deities would be equally strong in their world. Great mortal heroes like Sigmund and Sigurd took good strong women for their mates; would the great Thor, then, have some nebulous wimp (or wimpess) for wife?

So, accepting that Norse Goddesses should play an important role in ritual, how do you go about reconstructing a tangible personality from a mere name? Well, what I have doing for Oakrune Circle is this: first, I try to find anything and everything in the Eddas and Sagas and runestone inscriptions that even vaguely refers to the Goddess in question -- who her husband, father, children were; any personal traits mentioned; any actions she is said to have performed. Next, I try to find out any etymological meanings that can be gathered from her name. And lastly, I make stuff up! Well, not really; but there is a degree of personal contact which can help you fill out the details that have been lost these many centuries, basing your work on the facts you have found.

If nothing is known about her but her husband's name, use what you know about her husband to give clues: what kind of wife would Thor have? Also, you can use comparative mythology (gasp!) to help you out (plundering other cultures in good Viking tradition): if the lady is married to a sky-deity or weather God, might she not be a Mother Earth figure? You can meditate, often in a very casual and playful manner, creating little stories about the Goddess, trying to see her interacting with Gods and Goddesses you know a lot about: what would this Goddess and Odin talk about? How would she get along with Loki? (Does anyone get along with Loki??) In this way you can usually get enough information to do some kind of ritual; and after several rituals, even more information tends to pop up (no surprise).

As an example of some results of this process, which may strike hard-core fact-finders as too cavalier a treatment but which I believe is valid, I am presenting here the material I did on Jarnsaxa, the Goddess Oakrune Circle invoked along with Thor on Midsummer (we usually like to invoke both a Goddess and God at any given ritual, which is why I embarked on this mission of Goddess-analysis in the first place). This is what I could find out about her from books: her name means "Iron-Sword"; she's a Jotun, or Giantess; she's referred to as "the co-wife of Sif" (Thor's wife) in the Prose Edda; she is the mother of Thor's two sons, Magni ('Might') and Modi ('Courage'), who eventually inherit the famous hammer. Period. From this, after much mulling and playing around, I wrote a little (actually it's kind of long) legend about Jarnsaxa and Thor, just to get a feeling for what kind of lady she is.

This tale makes no pretense at being sacred scripture, although it does have a little symbolism here and there; it borrows shamelessly from Germanic fairy tales; and it is as legitimate as many other myths which were created by Norse court poets for the amusement of their patrons. The second thing I wrote was an invocation to Jarnsaxa (one to Thor, too, but that's for another day).

Methods like this can be used to fill out any mythology for which few details are available (Celtic mythology, for example, has been cited to me as being hard to track down) It also never hurts to find out something new

about well-known deities as well. I don't present these things as divine truth or absolute doctrine; I do present them as examples of a valid procedure for creating rituals out of very skimpy material. So, in good old folk-song tradition, "If you don't like it, you can sing some yourself."

The Courting of Jarnsaxa

Once upon a time, when the world was young, Thor the Thunderer, son of Odin, decided to go and see the world, though he was then but a lad. His father could not refuse him, as he well knew the joys of wandering himself; yet he sought to counsel his son in the ways of the world. "Thor, my son," said the All-Wise, "in you rests the strength of the earth and the might of the wind; none in the Nine Worlds is mightier than you; but, you are young, and, I fear, not much given to reflection; it may go harder with you than you think."

"Bah, Father! I care not for thinking, but for deeds. I know you have sought much for wisdom," the lad hastily amended, "but as for me, I would seek my own way in the world."

"That is as it should be; nevertheless, I will give you three tokens to take with you; perchance you may find some use of them when you are in trouble." With these words, Odin All father gave to his eldest son a raven's feather, a wolf's hair, and a flintstone. "Here, carry these with you. If you come into difficulty, take the feather and break it in half; it will bring you aid. If again you find trouble, take the hair and snap it in two; thus will you find help. When in the direst danger, take the flintstone and strike a spark on it. But only use these gifts when you cannot find the way to success by yourself."

Thor took his father's gifts and thanked him; but he secretly felt he would have no need

of such magician's tricks. And so, provided with a stout oak staff and a good lunch, Thor set out from Asgard.

To and fro over the Nine Worlds he wandered, doing many mighty deeds and seeing many wondrous sights. And in all this time, he prevailed by his own might and courage, and left his father's gifts in the bottom of his wallet. At last he came to the borders of Jotunheim, home of the Giants, the sworn enemies of the Aesir. "Ha! I am not afraid to venture further!" cried Asa-Thor. "I am not afraid of anything!" (He was, as I have said, yet young.) With that, he picked up his staff and strode down the rocky path that lead through the realm of the Jotuns. Here he did many brave deeds and saw many wondrous sights, and in all this time, he prevailed by his own might and courage, and left his father's gifts in the bottom of his wallet.

At last, he came to a castle on a rocky cliff. It was late in the day, and his provisions were by now running low. "I will venture forth and seek shelter for the night. Jotuns though they are, even they must surely follow the laws of hospitality!" (He was very young.) When Thor came to the door, he found a huge iron knocker, so heavy it would have taken thirty mortal men to lift it; but Red-Beard (although he had but a youth's beard then) lifted it with ease. Once, twice, thrice he knocked on the heavy stone door. Finally, he heard a woman's voice bellow, "Who is it that knocks so

loudly on my uncle's door?" "It is I, Asa-Thor, Odinson," Thor bellowed back. "I come to seek the guest's right. Open the door, if you dare." The heavy door swung open in a snap, and there stood a fair maiden, tall as an oak and ruddy as red mountain clay, with eyes bright as coals. "If I dare? I dare anything! I am Jarnsaxa, the Giantess, and I have often longed to see one of the Aesir. Hmm... you are not so handsome as I would have thought," the Giantess went on, heedless of the sparks in Thor's eyes. "Still, you look all right, though your manners are not of the best. I would not be so bold to proclaim my parentage in this house, for this is the home of my uncle, the fierce mountain Giant. He has little love for the Aesir. However," said the maiden, her voice lowered to a mere shout, "I am not ignorant of how to behave in the world; and, you do look all right. I will let you in and hide you, and perhaps all will be well."

Asa-Thor was loath to hide from the Giant, but he let himself be persuaded by the maiden. She bade him sit to dinner before her uncle came home. She placed before him a roast ox, and before you could blink twice, Thor had eaten half of it; but the maiden ate the other half as fast as he. Then she set before him an oven of beer, and before you could cough, Thor had downed it with one draught; but the maiden meanwhile emptied another oven just as big without so much as a blink. Then she gathered up all of the dishes on one arm and tossed them into the trough so hard that the timbers groaned. By this time, Thor was thinking that never had he seen so fine a girl, and would have said as much when they heard the rumbling footsteps of Jarnsaxa's uncle. The girl was quick to hide Thor under the bed, despite

his protestations. She then went to the fire and began to turn the spit.

When her uncle came into the room, he roared, "I smell the blood of the cursed Aesir, the murderers of my kinsmen!" "Shut your mouth and be quiet, or you will make me spoil my work," said the maid; "What you smell is an old bone that a raven dropped down the chimney this morning." Then the old Giant called for his dinner, but when he saw how little there was, he roared at his niece. "Be still," she roared back, "for the dogs carried one of the oxen away while I was busy; I have told you not to keep them in the house." The giant was but ill satisfied, but he once more sat down to the table and called for drink. When the girl brought it, he was vexed even more to see how little there was. "I suppose you will tell me the wind blew the beer out the window! Now I am certain some stranger has been here at my table. You wicked girl, I'll cuff you for lying!" At this moment Thor jumped out from under the bed, for he would not let Jarnsaxa be hit for all the gold in Svartalfheim.

"You need not stir yourself," said Jarnsaxa; "I am used to this ill-tempered old man. He knows better than to strike me!"

"Nonetheless, I will let neither man nor woman fight my battles for me," said the young God. "Here am I, Thor Odinson!" he cried, turning to the Giant, "I am not afraid of you or anyone else in the Nine Worlds. It was I who ate your meat and drank your ale; and such was my right, by all that's proper and good. But this maid is too fair to remain here alone with a cross old man like you; I think it will be better for her to come with me." "You might ask me first before making plans like that," interrupted Jarnsaxa. "Would you rather stay here

then," muttered Thor crossly. "No, I think you are quite right; I am tired of sitting at home and seeing no one but my uncle. It is time I got out into the world a bit."

"I think you both are too much in a hurry; you might both remember that, as head of the family, I must be consulted in such a matter," snorted the old Giant. He was a very fierce giant, but yet he secretly trembled at the sight of Asa-Thor. But he was also crafty, and wise in the ways of magic and deceit, and it was his plan to trick the Red-Haired God and find some devious means of destroying him. "I see no reason for Jarnsaxa not to leave home, but I must know first if you are a worthy companion for her. I will set three tasks for you; if you can fulfill them, Jarnsaxa may go with you; but if you cannot, your head is forfeit." "Don't bargain with him," whispered Jarnsaxa, 'He's nothing but an old cheat.' But Thor said, "Bring on your tasks! There is nothing I cannot do!" (Ah, he was young, and eager to show his prowess to Jarnsaxa, I fear.) "It's a bargain then!" crowed the old Giant; and he and the Asa shook hands on it.

The Giant thereupon took Thor to the cellar, where he threw a barrel of wheat and a barrel of barley upon the ground. "There, young stripling; these must be separated, each with its own kind, within the space of three hours, or your head is forfeit!"

Now Thor could perform any feat of bravery or courage, but this task, requiring deftness of hand and cunning, was quite beyond him. As he was brooding over his fate, he happened to think on his father's gifts, and, taking the raven's feather out of the bottom

of his wallet, broke it in half as Odin had instructed him. In an instant, there appeared before him the largest raven he had ever seen, with feathers as black as darkest Niflheim and eyes that blazed like the eternal fires. "Who are you, that seem neither God nor mortal?" Thor exclaimed. "I am neither God nor mortal; I am your father's friend and am sent here to help you out of trouble. What is your will?"

Thor told him then of the impossible task that had been given him. The raven thereupon gave three loud cries, and all birds that fly through the heavens instantly came to his bidding, and one by one they sorted the grains, each with its own kind. Within the space of one hour they were done and gone. "This is surely a wonder!" cried Thor. "How can I repay you?" "Only this small thing; that I may share your meat whenever you sit to table." "This seems a small thing indeed," said Thor; "it shall be done!"

When three hours had passed, the fierce old Giant sharpened his axe and went downstairs, prepared to slay his young guest, according to their agreement. But there he found all the grain in barrels, each according to its own kind, and Thor sitting and eating all his store of smoked meat. The giant was sorely vexed, but concealed his rage and pretended to be pleased by the God's success. But then he took him to the pasture, where there were a thousand goats and a thousand sheep wandering over hill and dale. "Separate these flocks, each according to its own kind, in the space of three hours, or your head is forfeit!"

When left alone, Thor made some attempt to gather the animals; but the sheep were too silly to be guided, and the goats were so

headstrong that they ran away from him until he huffed and puffed and turned red, and felt most foolish. Suddenly he remembered his father's gifts, and took the wolf's hair from the bottom of his wallet and snapped it in two, as Odin had instructed. In an instant there appeared before him the largest wolf he had ever seen, as grey as slate and with eyes like lightning. "Who are you, that seem neither God nor mortal?" "I am neither God nor mortal; I am your father's friend and am sent here to help you out of trouble. What is your will?"

Thor told him of the impossible task that had been given him. The wolf thereupon gave three loud cries, and all beasts that walk the earth instantly came to his bidding, and one by one they frightened and bullied the sheep and the goats into their own flocks, each according to its own kind. Within the space of one hour, they were done and gone. "This is surely a wonder." cried Thor. "How can I repay you?" "Only this small thing; that I may share your mead whenever you sit to table." "This is a small thing indeed," said Thor; "it shall be done."

When three hours had passed, the fierce old Giant sharpened his axe and went to the pasture, prepared to slay his young guest. But there he saw all the beasts in their herds, each according to its own kind, and Thor sitting in the middle drinking all the goat's milk. The Giant was even more vexed than before, but concealed his rage and again pretended to be pleased. "I see you are determined to have my niece, and, so fond am I of you, I shall give you an easy task for the last. All I require is that you pass one night in my bed; but if at any time you feel afraid and flee the room, you forfeit your head!" But the Giant really was

planning treachery; for as soon as the young God was asleep, the Giant planned to take his axe and slay Thor in his bed. But Jarnsaxa, who knew her uncle well, suspected some such trick and alerted Thor to his danger before he retired to bed alone (and sorely he wished he could have slept in Jarnsaxa's bed instead of her uncle's). So before he retired, he took the flint out of his wallet and struck a spark on it. In an instant, there appeared before him a slender and handsome youth, dressed in gay clothing and with wicked green eyes. "Who are you, who seem neither God nor mortal?" "I am neither God nor mortal," smiled the youth; "I am your father's friend and am sent to help you out of trouble. You seem to be having quite a bit of it lately. Well, now, what is your will?"

Thor then told him of his last task, and that he suspected the Giant of treachery. "Right you were to call on me," said the youth; "I know of treachery well, and I can tell you plainly that this Giant means for you never to leave his house alive. Now you must listen closely and do exactly what I say, and it may be all will still turn out well."

"I know well myself what to do with a traitor, cried Thor, waving his oak staff in the air. "Hold your tongue, you green youth!" cried the youth, stifling a laugh. "This is no time for boldness, although well I know that none can match you in strength and courage. But this Giant is well versed in cunning and magic, and it is not in combat that you can overcome him." So Thor listened to the youth's direction. He took a large Oak log from the fireplace, and placed it in the bed in his stead, arranging the coverlets so cunningly that it looked as if the Thunderer himself was indeed sleeping on the Giant's pillow. Next, he took from

the Giant's dresser a stone, a thorn, and a gold ring, as the youth bade him, and put them into his pocket. Then, he took his stout oak staff and hid himself behind the door.

Just as the clock struck twelve, sure enough, there came the Giant through the door, creeping softly in the dark with his axe upraised. When he came to the bed, he dealt such a blow where Thor's head should have been that it would have killed a stone. "Asa-Thor, how fare you?" called out the giant. But the youth, who had concealed himself under the bed, answered in Thor's voice, "Oh, passing well, passing well; only, it seemed as a gnat landed on my head in my sleep!" The Giant was well startled at these words, for he deemed Thor to have been dead. "Maybe I did not deal him a hard-enough blow; for it is said that he is strongest of all the Aesir," said the Giant to himself. So, he raised his axe behind him and dealt a blow three times harder than the first, so that the whole room shook; a mountain would be killed by such a blow. "Asa-Thor, how fare you?" called the Giant, being certain the God was surely dead this time. But the youth under the bed called out in Thor's voice, "Oh, passing well, passing well; only, it seemed as if a fly landed on my head in my sleep!"

At this, the Giant was quite frightened, for he could not imagine what kind of being could have withstood such a blow; still, he thought to himself, "Well, much have I heard of Thor's strength, not to mention his hard head; but this time, I will kill him surely." And with that, he swung his axe around his head three times, and dealt the bed such a blow, nine times harder than the others, that it would have shattered the World-Tree itself and brought time to an

end. "Asa-Thor, how fare you now?" called the Giant. But the youth under the bed said, "I would be well indeed, if I could but get some sleep in this bed; for if I but close my eyes, these winged insects will be lighting on my face, and the sound of them whirring round my head is enough to drive me mad!" "Why," said the Giant, turning pale as a corpse, "what did these insects feel like?" For he could not believe Thor was still alive. "They felt something like this!" cried the real Thor, rushing out from behind the door and fetching the Giant such a blow on his pate with his stout oak staff that the evil old creature was cleft in two. Then Thor and the youth and Jarnsaxa took provisions, and all the silver and gold that was her dowry. Outside, Jarnsaxa had hitched her two goats to a cart, and, jumping inside, they all sped away toward the border of Jotunheim.

They had but gone an hour's journey, when the youth said to Thor, "Look behind us over your left shoulder and tell me what you see." Thor looked and said, "I see a cloud of dust and many horses coming after." "That is the kin of the old Giant you slew; they are craving vengeance of us, but we'll fix them." And he bade Thor to throw the stone he had taken from the old Giant's dresser over his right shoulder; when Thor did this, the stone became a tall mountain, which the Giants had to knock down with their clubs before they could continue; meanwhile, Thor, Jarnsaxa, and the youth rode on. But after another hour had passed, the youth said again, "Look behind us over your left shoulder and tell me what you see." Thor looked and said, "I see a cloud of dust and many horses coming after." "That is the kin of the old Giant you slew; they have gotten over the mountain

and are craving vengeance of us, but we'll fix them." And he bade Thor throw the thorn he had taken from the old Giant's dresser over his right shoulder; when Thor did this, the thorn became a wide bramble-forest, which the giants had to tear up with their fists before they could continue; meanwhile, Thor, Jarnsaxa, and the youth rode on, and they made good use of their time, for they were nearly at the borders of Jotunheim within the space of another hour.

But then the youth a third time said to Thor, "Look behind us over your left shoulder and tell me what you see." Thor looked and said, "I see many horses and riders, fierce Giants armed with sword and club, and they are almost upon us!" "That is the kin of the old Giant you slew; they have gotten over the mountain and through the forest, and are craving vengeance of us; but we'll fix them for good." And he bade Thor to throw the gold coin he had taken from the old Giant's dresser over his right shoulder; when Thor did this, the coin multiplied into piles and piles of gold. When the Giants saw this, they all halted their journey and began to fight over the riches, so fiercely that they had soon slain each other and not a one remained alive. But one old troll-woman, the mother of the old Giant Thor had slain, was not to be pacified with gold, but kept riding, and almost jumped right into the chariot, had not Jarnsaxa dealt her a blow on the head with one of her massive girdle hooks, which struck the old woman dead on the spot. "By Asgard, this is the wench for me," roared Thor as they passed out of Jotunheim into the world of men. "I will marry you."

"You are too hasty. I said nothing of marriage," exclaimed Jarnsaxa. "I have

long wanted to see something of the world myself, and I am not sure I am ready to settle down. Besides, you and I are from two different worlds, and, while we now have many things in common, someday when you are grown, you will want a queen fit to sit with you in Asgard, and then you would only be ashamed of your Giant wife." Thor protested that such a thing would never be, but Jarnsaxa was firm, and he could see she was determined to go her own way (she was pretty but very stubborn). "Still," she went on, "you grow better to look at hourly, and you are a brave and lusty boy and have besides a fine appetite. I would not mind staying with you for a while, so what I propose is this: we will not wed, but be lovers; and you will go your way, and I will go mine; but whenever I long for you, I will call you from the heart of the mountain; and whenever you long for me, you will call me from the peak of the heavens; and thus, from time to time, we will be together."

This seemed a fair plan to Thor (who was really much too young to be thinking of settling down himself), so they pledged their troth to each other, and spent three days and nights together in the hidden groves of the forest; and at the end of that time, Jarnsaxa took three red hairs from the beard of Asa-Thor and wove herself a ring which turned to the finest red-gold as soon as Thor placed it on her finger. But Jarnsaxa gave to Thor a ring of iron, which he placed on the middle finger of his right hand; and whenever he thought of his fair and lusty Jarnsaxa, the ring gave forth sparks, and Thor would rumble through the heavens to meet his lady.

Then Thor bade farewell to Jarnsaxa, and she to him; and the Red God climbed into

his chariot drawn by goats. But he said to the youth who had helped him, "This surely was wondrously done. How can I repay you?" "Only this small thing," said the youth, "that I may travel with you on your journeys and see the wonders you see; and you shall lend me your strength, and I shall lend you my cunning, and together we will see the world. For," he muttered under his breath, "I think in games of wits, you could use an ally." "This seems a small thing," said Thor, "and now I begin to see there may be some use for cunning after all, although I do not think it as fine as battle. Therefore, friend of my father, go with me and be my companion; what is your name?" "My name is Loki, and I think you will never lack merriment nor rest easy as long as I ride in

your wagon; I travelled with your father ages before this, and will travel with you, for I can never keep still long." And that -is how Loki came to travel with Thor the Thunderer, and also how Thor won the love of the Giantess Jarnsaxa.

But as for Jarnsaxa, she went to live in the heart of the mountain, where she watches over the work of the dwarves, that they do not become lazy again as they were when Odin found them in the beginning of time. She later bore Thor two fine sons Magni and Modi, whom he took to live in Asgard and be his heirs; and ever did the Aesir treat Jarnsaxa with honor and courtesy, as befitted Thor's first love; and ever did Asa-Thor hasten to seek Jarnsaxa when the storm of love was upon him.

Invocation to Jarnsaxa

Daughter of the Rock,
Daughter of the Storm,
Daughter of Darkness, mighty Jarnsaxa.

In Jotunheim
In the home of Giants,
In Chaos, there were you born.

Mistress of Thor
Co-Wife of Sif
Mother of the heirs of Heaven,
Magni and Modi, the Storm-God's children.

Straight and sharp as a sword;
Hard as iron;
Bright as the jewel on the hilt;
Strong as the runes on the blade.

Within the mountain, you stoke the storm of lust,

the fiery heart of the passive Earth.

Your heart burns,
Your arms reach,
Your loins hunger.

Stern as the cliff,
Wild as the heath,
Firm as the rock
You wait, and call.

Ancient Giantess,
We call to you,
We of Midgard

Come, and fling your dark hair loose into the storm!
Come, and meet your lover, spark for spark!
Come, and strike the primal flame ablaze!

Come to the Circle, mighty Jarnsaxa!
Come!

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see Alice's new book: *Magic of the Norse Goddesses: Mythology - Ritual - Tranceworking*
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