

Reading the Gosforth Cross: Viking Sagas

The Death of Baldr and the Ragnarok from the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson

Baldr, the god of light, has dreams warning him that his life was in danger.

His mother, Frigga, collects promises from fire and water, from all metals, stones, earths, diseases, beasts, birds, poisons, and creeping things, that they would never harm Baldr. But she does not ask the mistletoe.

Once they know Baldr can not be harmed by weapons, the gods start each day by firing arrows and hurling spears at him.

The wicked god, Loki, is very jealous of Baldr. He finds out by tricking Frigga, that she missed asking the mistletoe. He cut and sharpens a length of mistletoe. Next morning he hands the mistletoe spear to the blind god, Hodr, and points him in the direction of Baldr.

Hodr throws the mistletoe spear and kills Baldr, who is taken down to the land of the dead, ruled by Hel.

The gods sent their messenger Hermod riding down to Hel on Odin's horse Slepnir to ask if they can have Baldr back.

Hel said she would release him only if the gods can prove the whole world mourns his death by collecting tears from every living thing and from every tree and stone.

The gods sent their elf messengers off collecting tears, but just when the job seemed done they meet an ugly giantess called Thokk who refuses to cry. So Baldr stays in Hel's realm until much later in the story.

The gods find out that Loki is to blame for the death of Baldr, and that Thokk was actually Loki in disguise. They are angry.

They capture Loki and tie him up at the foot of Yggdrassil.

**He lies on his back with his mouth propped open and a serpent tied above him.
The serpent drips one drop of poison into his mouth per day.
Loki's wife, Sigyn, holds a bowl over his mouth to collect the poison.**

**Sigyn waits until the bowl was almost full before she tries to empty it.
In panic, she accidentally spilt most of the poison down her husband's throat.**
He writhes in agony so violently that he causes earthquakes.
Eventually his chains break and he led the monsters into the great war against the gods.

One giant wolf rushed up to devour the sun, another to destroy the moon.

Heimdall, the watchman, blows the Gjallar-horn to warn his fellow gods.

Odin rides down to Hel's realm to ask for advice on how the gods should fight the monsters and on his return he battles with the giant wolf Fenrir, who swallows him whole.

Odin's son, Vithar, instantly puts his foot on Fenrir's lower jaw and seizes his upper jaw and tares him apart.

At the end of the story, the earth is restored from destruction and Baldr and Hodr return from the land of the dead.

Another detail from Snorri's writing that may be on the cross...

Before Ragnarok began, the Gods had a problem with the wolf Fenrir. Fenrir kept growing bigger and bigger and the gods feared he would soon be able to destroy them. He could easily burst free from iron shackles, so they asked the dwarves to make a magic ribbon that they could use to tie him up.

The Gods tricked Fenrir into being tied up just so he could show how strong he was by breaking free. Fenrir was suspicious and said he would only agree to being bound if one of the gods put his hand into his giant mouth, to prove there was no trickery.

Tyr put his hand in Fenrir's mouth.

When Fenrir discovered that he could not escape, he bit off Tyr's hand.

And two picture clues...



Vikings believed in Valkeries, powerful female figures who welcomed dead fighters to Valhalla with a drinking horn filled with mead.

This pendant was found in Sweden.

This Valkerie is carved on a Sigurd runestone in Sweden.

