

On Surtr

I wanted to take some time to address the issue of Surtr and Heathen Theology after some of the recent conflicts at a class at North East Thing (NET, formerly East Coast Thing, ECT). I was not in attendance at this event, and only read the text of the "[Heretical Heathenry](#)" class, which was brought to my attention via a public accountability post regarding the presenters experience of the event¹. While I have not attended NET or its predecessor, I do have friends who are current and former attendees.

From what I gather one of the contentious moments in the class centered around Surtr and his inclusion or disinclusion in ritual space, his worship and on some level, our role in our cosmology. As a child of Angrboda, a volva and a Heathen whose worship has been primarily Jotun focused for over a decade who has repeatedly been asked "why" with regards to my gods² I wanted to use this as a jumping off point to address the outlook and understanding of Jotunfolk in relation to how we understand the powers within our religion through the example of Surtr.

This is not intended as an argument for anyone to include Surt or any other Jotnar in their personal practice, rituals, or events if it doesn't make sense to the individual or group. As a polytheist, I think it's ridiculous to expect every human being to love, honor and worship every deity or considered part of our tradition. That is certainly not how our ancestors likely did things, and I know that for me part of the appeal of polytheism is that there is so much freedom to create

¹ I have some thoughts on the class itself from my perspective in religious studies, however I will likely address that in a separate essay.

²Which is wild to me. I didn't become a apostate to Catholicism and become a Heathen expecting to have *other Heathens* treat me the way many mainstream religions treat pagans.

intensely personal relationships and practices that make sense for the individual and their families.

This is a polite request to hear me out on the “why” of Jotnar practice through Surtr. He is often the most contentious “WHY HIM” when Jotun worship comes up, and I think it would be helpful to explain from my perspective. Polytheistic religions have the benefit of creating space for a lot of different beliefs under a very broad umbrella, as we are a deeds-based religion, not a belief-based religion - the most repeated Heathen axiom is that *we are our deeds* - we are our actions in this world, not a collection of beliefs. I would argue that aside from our broad shared pantheons, associated spirits and beings, and our understanding of the Nine Worlds, the things that define and join together Heathens are our shared values - honoring our ancestors, engaging in community with each other, keeping frith³ and keeping our word.

This is another great point to stop and remember is that Heathenry is not like Christianity, polytheism is not like monotheism, and our gods and their interrelationships are complex and can and should be interpreted by different people. I think that particularly for those of us who were raised in Catholicism and Christianity, there is a tendency to still interpret religion through that lens, intentionally or not. We can see this in early academic studies of religion that come out of anthropology, where the (often colonialist, well intentioned or not) outlooks of the anthropologists influenced how they interpreted religious word, concepts, rituals, etc, and what they may even recognize or define as religion⁴,

³ I have a lot to say about frith as a concept as well. Frith isn't the absence of debates or conflict within a community - we all have those - it's violating the social contract of safety within our homes. It is beyond having a 'peaceful environment' and to me, more about creating a safe and healthy community.

⁴ Defining what religion exactly *is* so also extremely difficult - get a roomful of religious studies academics together and you'll learn at least a dozen new definitions of religion. There really isn't an agreed upon definition. The one I found most amusing was “anything that sufficiently

but we can also see this in the ways we are taught Greek and Roman mythology in schools with a one to one correlation ex “Zeus is Jupiter” when things are often far more complicated, particularly in ancient polytheistic religions, where syncretism was common and Gods from various other cultures were folded in. A great example of this in Ancient Greek and Rome is Isis, - which is her *Greek* name - she is called Aset in her homeland of Egypt⁵ who had a flourishing cult well outside of Egypt in the ancient world⁶.

The translator of a text and their goal matter as much as the text they are working from. The majority of our sources are from people with a particular worldview, and we see this in older translations and understandings of mythology, where Loki and Baldur are very much painted as Satan/Jesus with Odin as a Jevhovaesque Godhead. I believe that it is an unintentional interpretation by folks who were thinking and writing about what we now call Heathen gods from a Christian perspective. When most of us converted⁷ we were unlikely to have deconstructed the way Christianity has impacted our understanding and outlook on the world, the way it is so deeply entrenched in American culture⁸, or how it

resembled Christianity” because it encapsulates this outlook - if you only see religion through your own religious worldview, you are going to view all other religions through that worldview and only see religion as something that echoes your understanding of religion.

⁵ This is a great example of how religion, particularly polytheist religions, grow through folding in new deities and beliefs/syncretism.

⁶ Note that the inclusion of another deity in polytheism wasn’t seen as a problem or heretical, it was good sense to venerate a potentially powerful deity that could have some effect on your life. It’s why we also see Heathens providing veneration to highly local spirits of the land - for references on that, see the entirety of [Kveldulf Gundersson’s “Elves, Wights and Trolls”](#)

⁷ I would argue that even now, the majority of our religion is converts. I am 40 years old and know only two people my age raised within a pagan religion - one is a Heathen, and the other was raised within Wicca but no longer practices formal Wicca. *Most* New Religious Movements - and despite having ancient roots, we *are* a New Religious Movement in the academic understanding - start with converts and grows through converts for their initial growth

⁸ [Look at how many media tropes relate to Jesus](#) and take specific note of [Crystal Dragon Jesus](#), which explores how often religions in fiction use the commonly understood language and concepts of Catholicism to make a fictional religion

would affect our understanding and views of the religion to which we converted⁹. Snorri Sturluson was not writing with the intention of preserving ancient religious traditions, he was writing to collect the myths necessary to understand and write skaldic poetry. That he managed to preserve so much information that has become important to us as practicing heathens is wonderful, but it was never his intention and he was not writing with the eyes of a historian or academic attempting to preserve ancient religious traditions.

First, we should touch on how I perceive the gods and cosmology of Heathenry. I can only speak for myself and my personal beliefs, and some of this will of course be my own personal gnosis. I understand the three pantheons within Heathenry thusly and with the understanding that these are not hard and fast boundaries: The Aesir are on some level, gods of humanity and human concepts - marriage, kingship, storytelling, healing, shipbuilding. The Vanir I understand as gods of humanity's relationships with nature - fertility mysteries, farming, the cycles of the year. The Jotnar are for the most part the personifications of the forces of nature - wolves, lightning, magic, fire, old age - particularly the forces of nature which were in apparent conflict with humanity. Thor literally wrestles with the concept of aging while adventuring. Talk about a direct metaphor. I also view the pantheons as examples of waves of potential migration, with gods of various cultures coming together, syncretizing, and changing as they come into contact with each other, and the mythology echoing these conflicts in the cultural memories.

⁹ Anecdotally, this can be seen in American Roman Catholicism, where there has been an increase of Christian converts due to the perception of Catholicism being more 'traditional', and the response of some lifetime Catholic lay people to the extremely hardline position converts perform. Converts to a new religion often initially 'go hard' in their practice while discovering their new identity within that religion.

Folks who worship Jotnar or who identify with Northern Tradition Paganism¹⁰ understand Surt in this creative/destructive duality; he is understood as the first being (as Muspellheim existed before even Nifleheim), who initiated the meeting of fire and ice which created the world and the realms as we know them; or see him as a personification of the spark of creation. Logi is the personification of fire, but Surtr is the essence of both fire and a personification of the Icelandic volcanoes. Volcanoes are a powerful natural force, and humans are rightly terrified of them - look at Pompeii - you don't even need to be close to a volcano for it to kill you. Yet however destructive they are, volcanoes are one of the most important geological phenomena on earth, having created about eighty percent of the land on our planet. Iceland would not exist without the volcanoes there which have provided land itself as well as fertile soil. Our creation myth talks about the meeting of fire and ice, and I see this as a clear metaphor - when volcanic fire meets the cold of ice water, it slows down and becomes land.

That such a powerful natural force would have an effect on the cosmology and religion of the people living near them makes sense, and it is something we see in other cultures that live around active volcanoes - even now, the Indonesian volcano Mount Bromo, still receives veneration and worship. That the name Surtr does not appear in Scandinavia but rather solely within Iceland has been noted by scholars as early as 1905¹¹ and some view this as evidence of the

¹⁰ Just as within Heathenry there are differences in practice, there are a variety of folks who do so among Jotunfolk, with different names and perspectives. Many Northern Tradition Pagans do not identify as Heathens, some like myself identify as both a Heathen and Northern Tradition Pagan. Other Jotun focused traditions are Thursatru (which is heavily based on gnosticism), Rokkrtru, which focuses their devotion to a specific pantheon, the Rokkr Gods, meaning "Twilight", to the exclusions of the Vanir and Aesir, much the way Vanatru focuses solely on the Vanir. Others use the term Jotuntru for similar reasons. I tend to use the term "Jotunfolk" as a catch all for anyone working with Jotuns, which is the primary commonality here.

¹¹ "In 1905 Bertha Philpotts argued that the specific beliefs about the end of the world incorporated within the *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas* were not brought to Iceland from Scandinavia by its Norse settlers but were, instead, framed in Iceland by the colonists' first encounters with, and responses to, volcanism (Philpotts 1905). She noted that Surtr's name was undocumented

specific connection between Surtr and volcanoes. Surtr as a potential personification of the volcanoes of Iceland, or of primordial fire, and thus both a creative *and* destructive force is not unlike other deities of creation and destruction across various cultures, notably the Hindu Shiva, who creates and destroys the world over and over or the Hawaiian goddess Pele, who is a personification of the volcano and creatrix¹². I think it's notable that while both Shiva and Pele can be seen as antagonistic, they are not viewed as evil despite the highly destructive nature of their creativity - it is simply part of the natural cycle of life.

There is some evidence of a Surtr cult in the historical record around the Icelandic Surtshellir volcanic cave and which is attested to in the Landnámabók manuscript about the settlement of Iceland, where a Thorvald Holbarki is said to have “*went up to the cave of Surt and recited there a drapa*¹³ *which he had made on the giant in the cave.*”¹⁴ with no indication that this was atypical or viewed in a negative way. I understand this to indicate that Surtr’s relationship to our ancestors was more complex than solely viewing him through his destructive role in Ragnarok.

elsewhere in Scandinavia and in Iceland was exclusively associated with Surtshellir, a massive cave in western Iceland's Hallmundarhraun lava field.” - [Ritual responses to catastrophic volcanism in Viking Age Iceland: Reconsidering Surtshellir Cave through Bayesian analyses of AMS dates, tephrochronology, and texts](#)

¹² Pele is so beloved even today, the “Love has Won” group was run out of Hawaii due to protests after their leader said she was Pele incarnate. [“Cult-like” Colorado spiritual group met with violent protests during Hawaiian sojourn](#)

¹³ [A heroic, laudatory verse form in old Icelandic, popular between the 10th and 13th centuries and featuring a refrain](#)

¹⁴ [Ritual responses to catastrophic volcanism in Viking Age Iceland: Reconsidering Surtshellir Cave through Bayesian analyses of AMS dates, tephrochronology, and texts](#)

Regarding cycles, some of us also understand time and the creation and destruction of the universe to be inevitable and cyclical - Ragnarok is inevitable and part of that cycle of death and rebirth - and that rebirth is described right along with the destruction of the world. Surt kills Freyr, Odin is killed by the Wolf, who is killed by Thor, who is killed by Jormungandr, who kills him in turn and so on. But Magni and Modi survive, and Baldur is returned from Hel.¹⁵ Humanity survives - Líf and Lífthrasir hide from the sons of Muspell and emerge in the new world as well. The cycle continues, and Ragnarok is not just the destruction of the universe, but the pathway to the next one's creation.

Even in destruction, there is rebirth. A volcano destroys, but it also creates. To understand this isn't wishing for Ragnarok or encouraging it, but understanding the inevitability of the cycles of the world we live in. Cattle die, Kinsmen die, and we ALL will die. Every single one of us has the same fate - no one here gets out alive. Heathens know that they and everything will eventually end, and rather than becoming nihilistic or pessimistic, we looked into the gaping void of Ginnungagap, saw that same truth, and decided to write our names upon the world through our deeds. We throw ourselves into life with an intensity and passion born from the inevitability of death.

That is why I honor Surtr - carefully, respectfully - because he was there at the beginning, and he will be there at the end. I don't cultivate the same kind of deep, personal emotional relationship with Surtr as I do with Angrboda - trying to do so with Surtr would be like trying to do so with Ymir, who is as remote and abstract. Surtr is the spark of inspiration, and the spark that lights the pyre. I

¹⁵ I think the moves Odin makes are not necessarily to prevent or even delay Ragnarok, but to lay the foundations for what comes next - it is notable again that Baldur, Nanna and potentially Hod are protected in Hel by their deaths, which allows them to return to help the surviving children of the Gods.

honor him when I create something, in its creation, I honor him when I dance with fire, knowing its danger as well as its beauty, and I honor him if and when something I create is destroyed.

I understand him as the personification of volcanoes, as I believe our ancestors did as well, as indicated by the naming of Surtshellir cave and its potential use as a devotional space. I think the way the volcanic eruptions of Iceland affected the land have an influence in how Surtr was perceived - Iceland has thirty volcanoes, which are unpredictable and explosive when they erupt, whereas Hawaii has six volcanoes that are less explosive and last longer. The land created by volcanic eruptions is not consistently as fertile in Iceland as it is in Hawaii.

I believe that the dualistic good vs evil perspective of Christian record keepers and interpreters of historical Icelandic literature has influenced, unconsciously or not, portrayals of the gods and their relationships with each other, and the animistic and polytheistic outlooks of pre-Christian peoples, as having existed in that worldview for a long time influences the way we as converts understand the lore. Deconstructing our relationship with our religions of origins, which for most of us was some form of Christianity or another Abrahamic monotheistic tradition, is difficult and can take a lifetime, especially when we are moving from a monotheistic outlook to a polytheistic one, which are extremely different. For me, this deconstruction has led to an animistic understanding of the world, including the natural forces of the world personified in the Jotnar, and a belief that the relationships between Jotuns and the Aesir/Jotuns and humanity are antagonistic, yes, but not inherently evil.

That all being said, I understand that not everyone feels the same way about Surtr specifically. As I said at the start of this essay, this is not intended to

be a call to demand inclusion of Surtr or other Jotnar within anyone's personal practice, community event, etc. It is intended to illuminate the perspective and worldview of myself, and others who have similar perspectives. There are some beliefs I and others have that do differ from the larger community, but Heathenry as I said earlier, is a religion of our deeds and acting on our shared values, rather than a religion of rigid and specific beliefs.

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