

## Odin's eye

Odin lived in Asgard, the home of the Norse gods. As well as being god of war, battle, victory and death, he was also the god of magic, poetry, prophecy and wisdom. Like most of the gods, he didn't stay in Asgard all the time. When he came down to earth, which they called Midgard, he wandered about in a long dark blue cloak, with a beautiful silver clasp with letters called runes engraved on it. These runes contained magic spells.

Odin sometimes got tired of walking and riding about. One day when he was really fed up with wandering, he had a good idea. "If only I could see everything that is going on," he said to himself, "Then, I could stay at home." And he thought about this for a while. What he needed was true wisdom. If only he had true wisdom, he would be able to stay at home and see everything all at the same time.

But to gain true wisdom, he knew he would have to have a drink from the well-guarded by Mimir, the wisest man in Midgard.

The next morning, Odin left Asgard. He took his favourite knapsack and set off for Mimir's Well. The journey was dangerous. For he had to climb over rocky mountains with blizzards of snow and ice cold winds. The well was near where the giants lived in Jotunheim and lay under a huge ash tree. Mimir was not at all hospitable. "He won't give me a drink for nothing," said Odin. "The price will be very high." How right he was.

As Odin tramped along the road to the well, he met a giant riding on the back of a reindeer. He immediately recognised this lofty fellow - he was the wisest of the giants who knew many things - but for all his wisdom, he did not see-through Odin's disguise. Odin had pulled himself up to the height of the giant and fell into conversation with him. "There's something I would dearly like to learn from you," he said.

And the giant replied jovially: "Ho ho. before you can learn from me, you must answer my riddle. And if you answer it wrong, you will lose your head."

What are the names of the horses that Day and Night drive across the sky?

Skinfaxe and Hrimfaxe are the horses that drive Day and Night across the sky.

'Hmph', said the giant. 'You keep your head'. The giant was disappointed. In return Odin asked, "Just tell me what I'll have to give Mimir for a drink from the Well of Wisdom?"

'He will ask for your right eye,' said the giant.

Odin shuddered. 'That's a lot to ask for. Is there no other way?'

"There is no other way. Many have asked for the wisdom of the waters, but not one has yet agreed to pay the price."

Odin nodded. He was glad to leave the wise but fierce giant and walk on. The path was stony, and there was a bitterly cold wind and rain so that his cloak was soon wet through.

He fingered the clasp and whispered the rune: his cloak dried, and the weather improved, but the path was still rough, and he had to be very careful where he put his feet.

Odin continued his journey. Eventually, after turning a sharp bend in the road he was able to see the huge Ash Tree bordering Jotunheim, the Giants' Land. It was indeed a wonderful and a beautiful tree, very tall, and very deep-rooted, as ash trees generally are. Its deep roots drew wisdom from the four corners of the earth. And near the tree Mimir stood by his Well.

'Ho there Odin, I've been waiting for you.' said Mimir, for he had drunk from the Well, and knew everything that would happen, and everyone's name before they told him. 'Are you thirsty?'

'Yes' said Odin. 'I have a great thirst for Wisdom, and yes, Mimir, I need to drink from your Well.'

Mimir laughed. 'Many are thirsty for my waters, but they do not get to drink from them. No one has yet agreed to my price. You must give me your right eye.'

Odin considered one last time if the price was too high. His pale blue eyes were the colour of the sky on a bright winter's day, when the frost is hard on the ground. His eyes could pick out the tiniest bird miles and miles away across the frozen tundra. If a human, or even a god, looked him in the eyes, they could not but feel a kind of awe. But in the end, he did have two of them.

'I will pay your price, Mimir.' And so saying, he tore his right eye from his head. The pain was searing. He gave it to the guardian of the Well. Mimir handed him a horn brimming with the waters of wisdom. Odin took a deep drink.

Immediately he saw everything that had happened and everything that was in the future. Odin laughed with happiness when he foresaw the joy that would come to him.

But seeing all the sorrows and troubles that would happen to humankind, he also knew what he could do to help. For even though the gods really have no need to trouble themselves about us mortals, and our puny lives and petty sufferings, they do actually care - at least some of the time. After he drank from the Well of True Wisdom, he knew that he must never let evil get the upper hand in the world of humans on a permanent basis. And at least we mortals can be grateful for that small mercy.

And that is the story of how Odin got his True Wisdom, and of how he lost his eye. It is just possible that that is how he got his name too, for odin or "odeen" - in Russian, means one.