



When the Hurly-Burly's Done:

The Changing Face of Swedish Fire Culture

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Every god needs a demon — together they form a necessary, contradictory union. Until we know darkness, our understanding of light is flawed. Likewise we have no measure for cold but as the absence of warmth. Life is dear precisely because of the inevitability of death. And so, with fire, we must begin with ice.

About 10,000 years ago, glaciers covered a quarter of the globe, including all of Scandinavia; when the Ice Age ended, the land we call Sweden was exposed to the sun. Boreal forest colonized this new territory — birch and pine trees, ericaceous shrubs, grasses, lichen, and moss. Plant life flourished with a complementary weather pattern: moist, warm air from the Gulf Stream flowed to the east, colliding over Sweden with cold, dry air rolling westward from Siberia. The resulting thunderstorms provided rain, the mother of germination, and lightning, the father of wildfire.

In burning, fire stimulates growth. It's an essential paradox, fine-tuned over eons and with which the entire fragile and complex symbiosis between plants and animals has evolved. Burning forest is the catalyst of diversity: fire decomposes deadwood, reveals land to sunlight, balances pH values of soil, and restructures relationships between species. The long northern winter means a short growing season, and slower rates of decomposition; fire can break down rapidly what fungi and insects take decades to accomplish. In short, Swedish ecology craves the burn.

Soon after the forests arrived in Scandinavia, bear, deer, elk, moose, wild boar, beaver, and man followed. *Homo sapiens* was by then a well-established species. Hunting, clothing, and ritualized disposal of the dead had existed for centuries by the time the Ice Age ended; religion and art for twenty or thirty millennia; fire-making was already a quarter of a million years old.

Crouched in caves or rude stone settlements, early Teutonic people kindled the life-giving spark using a bow to spin the tip of a wooden dowel in a hole carved into another piece of wood. They overcame oppressive winter darkness with the torch, banished evil spirits with the bonfire, scorched the earth to mark livestock grazing limits against rival clans, and cooked meat and brewed beer over the open flame. The Iron Age brought axes and swords from the glowing furnace, and a shift from burial to cremation in their ceremonies for the dead. Fire was treated with

reverence and awe: like the gods, it both gave life and took it away. Kept under control, fire meant survival; out of control, it spelled death.

Primitive farmers reclaimed land from the forest and the bog by burning it to the ground; they reburnt the fields every decade or so to maintain their fertility. *Svedjebruk*, this type of slash-and-burn agriculture, grew so strong in the southeast quarter of the Scandinavian peninsula that it gave its name to the country of Sweden.

As the Norse mastered the management of flame, they extended their influence — and their fires — yet deeper into Europe's far north, diverging from their Germanic brethren the Saxons, Vandals, and Goths. They evolved their own religion, law, art, social organization, and a language that later brought terror to those unfortunate enough to hear it on the tongues of ship-borne berserkers who swooped down on Europe from around the 8th century AD. To the west, the Vikings reached Ireland in 25-foot dragon-shaped longships, fell upon undefended villages, raped every woman and killed every man, took every piece of treasure, burned every house and manuscript. To the east they trafficked in human misery, trading slaves between Arab merchants in the Black Sea and Moorish buyers in Spain.

The north-men also distinguished themselves as merchants and immigrant citizens. The Norwegian Vikings (*Norrmen*) established and founded the cities of Dublin and York, settled the French region of Normandy, and reached North America 500 years before Columbus. The Swedish Vikings (*Rus*) crossed the Baltic to ply the rivers Volga, Vistula, Don, Dniepr, and Bug, established a network of trading posts from St. Petersburg to Byzantium, founded the cities of Novgorod and Kiev, and ultimately gave their name to Russia.

But the Nordic worldview was forged in the crucible of Teutonic mythology, hardened by life in a frozen world and tempered by the intimacy of their relationship with fire. Northern conceptions of the world's beginning and end were closely bound in flames, from a genesis of fire and ice to the final holocaust of *Ragnarök*.

According to myth, before men or gods existed the Gaping Void lay between the extremes of *Niflheim*, dominion of ice, and *Múspell*, realm of fire. A cataclysmic union of hot and cold gave

rise to the giant Ymer, whose legs fornicated and begat issue. Among this monstrous litter came Surt the fire giant, who stood watch at the gates of *Múspel*, and the ice giantess Hel, goddess of the dead, who presided over *Niflheim*. (It's appropriate that northern man, stalwart against the hardships of severe winter, would fill his vision of Hades with ice.) Via incestuous couplings, other giants whelped the first gods: white-bearded Oden the master of magic and wisdom; redheaded Thor the hammer-wielding warrior; and blond Frej of the enormous erection, lord of fertility. They butchered Ymer and built the world from his body.

But as they gave life to the world, raised the lofty home of the gods, posted a chthonic dwarf in each corner of the terrestrial realm of men, and defended their territories against giants on the farthest shores of the earth-encircling sea — even as they welcomed fallen heroes into Valhalla and slew monsters, feasted and feuded, held counsel and played pranks, loved and hated each other in a long drama celebrating the full spectrum of virtue and vice — *Ragnarök*, “the doom of the gods,” lurked in the wings.

It was destined from the beginning. In the final act, Loke the Trickster will be sent to the inferno in chains, and an age of depravity will ensue on Earth, where incest and fratricide will reign unchecked. Then a winter of three years with no summer, then three years of war. The great wolf Fenrir slips its shackles and the Midgård Serpent rises from the sea spewing venom. Loke rips free from his manacles and, under Surt's command, steers a shipload of fire giants out of *Múspel* and into the terrestrial world. Ominous rumbling shakes the universe, and the four dwarves tremble.

The gods and the chosen elect of Valhalla gird for battle against the fire giants, a fight from which none shall flee and none rise up. Fenrir the wolf swallows Oden. Thor smashes the Midgård Serpent but falls dead of its venom. Frej is hewn in two by Surt's fiery sword. The sun grows dark, the stars fall from the sky, Surt hurls fire over all the world, the universe is consumed in flame, and Earth sinks burning into the sea.

It may seem odd that the religious prophesy of Nordic people committed their own pantheon to holocaust. But flames represent life, as opposed to the certain death of deep freeze — just as in the forest, where blackened earth gives rise to green, and nothing grows from a glacier. Belief in *Ragnarök* may or may not have driven Viking war lust, but it certainly underscored their understanding of fire as the primary element: both creator and destroyer, transcendent giver and taker, outranking Oden himself as the principal form of the godhead.

Most of what we know today about Norse history comes from Latin and Arabic texts, as the north-men themselves were largely

illiterate. But they did leave thousands of runestones, those monolithic tablets carved with simple memorials like “Ulf made this stone for Sven, his father” or “I, Dag, carved these runes.” A gross latecomer to the global literary scene dating from around the third century A.D., runes were a simplified version of longer-established alphabets like Roman and Greek made easier for carving on wood, bone, and stone.

Myth holds that Oden hung himself for nine days in the tree of life to receive the magic of the runes. He sent the god Heimdal by ship to deliver this gift to mankind; Heimdal became the first patriarch, siring the three classes of man. On the other side of the world, Hindu mythology's description of Agni, the god of fire, corresponds with Heimdal point-for-point in almost every regard, down to the unusual details of his physical appearance, his shipboard arrival with the gift of written language to the people, and his role as the progenitor of the classes of man. Because the races of Northern Europe and Northern India are descended from the westward and eastward migrations of a single people (the Aryans of northern Iran), we can assume that Heimdal and Agni derive from the same Aryan ur-myth, and therefore that these ancients accorded equal status to fire and the written word as the powerful high mysteries of life.

Indeed, fire and written language dwell together in the psyche. Magic power inhabits anything which can so overshadow its master. Whether heralding the truth or fostering a lie, writing renders permanent the ephemera of speech, a raspberry in the face of oblivion and a triumph over the grave. Fire, like poetry, is the unacknowledged legislator of the world.

It was the steady march of Christianity, not *Ragnarök*, which finally brought the end of the Viking era. By the 12th century, Christian missionaries had refashioned many pagan myths to suit their own purposes. They appropriated Hel, the pagan death goddess of frozen *Niflheim*, to name their own realm of the dead, only switching the décor from icicles to flames. Cremation was forbidden in favor of burial. In religious imagery, fire no longer played the sacred life force, but rather the infernal punishment — a crafty move intended to sway people from their former “savagery” and into the arms of Christ.

This shift from pagan to Christian ultimately bolstered Scandinavia. It eliminated piracy and slavery, encouraged literacy, and incorporated the north into a larger European embrace. No longer intent on looting foreign lands, Nordic people could concentrate on their farming. *Svedjebruk* was not affected by the new religious imagery, and Swedes continued to slash and burn the forest like mad agricultural salamanders. In any given year,

Swedish farmers had *svedjor* in various stages — some felled, some freshly burned, some planted to rye, oats, barley, or turnips, some grazed or reburned, and some left to fallow. They checker-boarded their landscape in a kaleidoscope turned by axe and torch. Unlike the Viking war party, and as opposed to the sedentary agriculture of central Europe, *svedjebruk* encouraged peaceful pioneering; the pattern distinguishes Swedish settlements in Iceland, Greenland, and Minnesota. The fires help dis-

eats gingerbread. Today, Lucia wears a crown of high-intensity lightbulbs rather than candles, but the symbolism still holds: the Swedes take a moment to be cozy in the candlelight, tipping a hat to fire as they enter the season of darkness.

If the history of Sweden's long relationship with fire seems complicated, we must remember the extremities of geography and culture that have shaped the outlook of Europe's far north: boreal

hardship breeds connection to the flame. Yet the fire-loving Swede is a microcosm for mankind, our bold clan of earthlings just trying to keep warm on a lonely rock as it hurtles through empty space. Who among us has never felt vulnerable in the cold and the darkness? Who can ever forget the mesmerizing flicker of the

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tinguish good times from bad; in a bad year, drought turns healthy *svedje* into disastrous wildfire, or heavy rains make vigorous burning impossible. "Without fire *svedjebruk* fails," writes Stephen Pyne, author of *World Fire: the Culture of Fire on Earth*. "Without a good burn *svedjefolk* face famine."

But even after a thousand years of Christianity, the pagan fire gods still draw breath once a year. Every Swedish town builds a *majbrasa* (Mayfire) on the evening of April 30 for the celebration of Valborg, the coming of summer. It's a celebration for the entire community. In the old days, likely kindling included dead trees from the forest or the offscourings of dilapidated barns; the *majbrassor* of contemporary Stockholm burn the lawn clippings, broken skis, stained sofas, and other flammable spring-cleaning detritus of modern suburbia. Many of today's Swedish teenagers get drunk and *hongla* ("suck face") for the first time at Valborg, singing university fight songs and toasting the season of light. Yes, the last surviving pagan fire festival is a Swedish frat party.

On December 13, as Earth turns her face from the sun, Swedes celebrate the candlelit festival of Lucia, the saint of light. The original Santa Lucia was a Christian martyr blinded by Moors in Sicily, and according to Christian tradition she wears a crown of burning candles in heaven. Every neighborhood in Sweden selects one girl to play Lucia, and with her bright tiara she leads a train of singing children caroling through the town. Their parents light candles in every window and sip hot mulled wine, and everybody

hearth-fire, or the heart-stopping terror of the three-alarm blaze? Who has not grappled with these beautiful contradictions of conflagration?

We've come a long way since the heyday of Heimdal and Surt, but fire remains an elemental force in the great paradoxes of our human drama. It lights the peace pipe and drives the cruise missile, powers both factories and ovens, raises skyscrapers and brings them crashing to earth. Harnessed, it fosters the very processes upon which our civilization depends; unchecked upon the land, it demonstrates the terrible and destructive whims of nature. It evokes ancient mysteries: the hushed respect and the howling fear. Fire is the metaphor of rage and the foundation of passion, the allegory of desire and the symbol of genius, the inspiration of poetry and the feeling of love.

Which brings us back, in a way, to gods. ◊