

## *Tyr: The Maimed God*

by Ann Gróa Sheffield

Of the few myths that survive about Tyr, by far the best known is the binding of Fenrir the wolf:

When the gods tried to persuade the wolf Fenrir to allow the fetter Gleipnir to be placed on him, he did not believe that they would free him until they put Tyr's hand in his mouth as a pledge. Then, when the Aesir would not loose him, he bit off the hand...(1)

In thinking about this myth, some have emphasized the self-sacrificial nature of Tyr's action (2). Others have focussed on the myth as an example of Tyr's honor: he keeps his pledge, even at the cost of his right hand (3). Both of these views are important in understanding the tale's meaning. To me, though, the most striking aspect of the myth is its obvious, physical one: *Tyr loses his hand*. I would like to make three points about the nature and consequences of this loss.

1. The loss is grievous. I would rather lose an eye or foot, even a lung or kidney, than my right hand. Our tools, clothing, weapons, and even our homes are designed for our hands. The loss of a hand is terrible to imagine. Tyr himself speaks of this in the *Lokasenna*:

My hand do I lack, but Hrothvitnir thou,  
And the loss brings longing to both...(4)

2. The loss is permanent. There can be no "recovery" or "deep healing" (to use the fashionable jargon) from this loss - Tyr is the one-handed Ás now and will be so until he falls at Ragnarok. If it were otherwise, his pledge and his sacrifice would be meaningless.

3. The loss is overcome. Tyr is not defeated by his disability. Instead, like the star (Tir) that "never fails" in the Anglo-Saxon rune poem (5), Tyr shines out as an exemplar of valor and learning:

He is the boldest and most courageous...It is a proverbial saying that he who surpasses others and does not waver is *Tyr*-valiant. He is also so well informed that a very knowledgeable man is said to be *Tyr*-wise (6).

Physically or psychologically, everyone is maimed in great or small ways in the course of living. All can choose to make their injuries into excuses or to be their best in spite of them. This is not to say that we should not help and support people who are suffering - some wounds can be healed, and more can be helped. Rather, the story of Tyr is for me a challenge not to let life crush me down, but to develop what I do have to the fullest. In the words of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Deor* (7):

þæs ofereode; þisses so maeg.

(That was overcome; so may this be.)

## References.

1. Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, transl. Jean Young, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1954, p. 53.
2. Edred Thorsson, *Futhark*, Samuel Weiser: York Beach, ME, 1984, pp 53-55.
3. Lewis Stead and the Raven Kindred, *Ravenbók: The Raven Kindred Ritual Book*, Ch. 5, "The Gods of Asgard," <http://www.webcom.com/~lstead/Ravenbok.html>.
4. *Poetic Edda*, Henry Adams Bellows, transl.; The American-Scandinavian Library: New York, 1923, p. 39. "Hrothvitnir" is Fenrir, Loki's son.
5. Edred Thorsson, *At the Well of Wyrð*, Samuel Weiser: York Beach, ME, 1990, p. 51.
6. Snorri Sturluson, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
7. Bruce Dickens, ed., *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples*, Cambridge University Press, 1915, p. 72; reprinted by the Klaus Reprint Co.: New York in 1968. (My translation.)

©1994, 2000 by Ann Gróa Sheffield. All rights reserved.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in the magazine *Asatru Today*.