

# The Horses of the Sun Goddess: Exploring the steeds that pull Sól's chariot in Norse Mythology

The myths and legends of the Norse people are filled with captivating tales of gods, giants, and fantastical creatures. Among these, the story of the sun goddess Sól and her chariot is particularly intriguing. While Sól's role in guiding the sun across the sky is well-known, less is often said about the powerful steeds that pull her chariot and enable her daily journey. This article delves into the lore surrounding these magnificent horses, exploring their names, origins, and significance in Norse cosmology.

## Sól: The Sun Goddess in Norse Mythology

Before we explore the horses themselves, it's essential to understand the role of Sól in the Norse pantheon. Sól (Old Norse for "Sun") is the goddess who personifies the sun in Norse mythology<sup>1</sup>. She is depicted as a radiant and beautiful goddess, responsible for bringing light and warmth to the world<sup>2</sup>. Every day, she drives her chariot across the sky, pulled by her horses, in a relentless journey that brings about the cycle of day and night<sup>3</sup>. Sól is the wife of a man named Glenr<sup>1</sup>.

Sól's importance in Norse mythology is evident in various texts and artifacts. The Prose Edda, a 13th-century collection of Norse myths, describes her as the sister of Máni, the moon god, and the daughter of Mundilfari<sup>1</sup>. She is also mentioned in the Poetic Edda, a collection of Old Norse poems, where her fate during Ragnarök, the apocalyptic battle that brings about the end of the world, is foretold<sup>1</sup>.

Though some may joke that the sun is rarely seen in the Nordic world, it was essential to the continuation and preservation of everyday life. Sól's warmth and light were crucial for agricultural endeavors, ensuring the land's fertility and the success of crops<sup>2</sup>. As such, Sól was sometimes invoked in rituals or prayers for a bountiful harvest and favorable weather conditions<sup>2</sup>.

## The Chariot of the Sun

Sól's chariot is not merely a mode of transport; it is a symbol of the sun's journey across the sky and the cyclical nature of time<sup>2</sup>. The chariot itself is said to have been created by the gods from burning embers that flew out of Muspelheim, the realm of fire<sup>1</sup>. This fiery origin emphasizes the sun's power and its vital role in sustaining life. To cool the horses that pull this chariot, the gods placed two bellows beneath their shoulders<sup>1</sup>.

The chariot is depicted in various ways in Norse art and literature. One notable example is the Trundholm sun chariot, a Bronze Age artifact discovered in Denmark<sup>2</sup>. This artifact, dating back to around 1400 BCE, features a horse-drawn chariot carrying a large bronze disk, interpreted as a representation of the sun<sup>2</sup>. The Trundholm sun chariot provides a tangible link to the ancient

beliefs surrounding the sun and its journey across the sky. The chariot was cast using the lost wax method, and the disk has a diameter of approximately 25 centimeters<sup>4</sup>. The disk is gilded on one side, consisting of two bronze disks joined by an outer bronze ring, with a thin sheet of gold applied to one face<sup>4</sup>. Some authors have suggested that the decoration on the disk numerically encodes a lunisolar calendar<sup>4</sup>.

## The Horses of Sól

While sources often mention that Sól's chariot is drawn by two horses, there is some variation in the names and descriptions of these steeds. This information is summarized in the table below:

Name	Meaning	Source
Árvakr and Alsviðr	Early Riser and Swift	Prose Edda <sup>5</sup>
Skinfaxi and Hrimfaxi	Shining Mane and Frost Mane	Poetic Edda <sup>6</sup>

Regardless of their specific names, the horses are consistently depicted as strong and tireless creatures, capable of pulling the sun across the heavens day after day<sup>7</sup>. Their enduring strength is a testament to the power of the sun and its unwavering presence in the lives of the Norse people<sup>2</sup>.

It is interesting to note the connection between the horses' names and the contrasting aspects of the sun's journey. Árvakr ("Early Riser") and Alsviðr ("Swift") suggest the sun's vigorous and rapid ascent at the start of the day<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, Skinfaxi ("Shining Mane") and Hrimfaxi ("Frost Mane") evoke the contrasting imagery of light and darkness, day and night, which are integral to the sun's cycle<sup>6</sup>.

## The Significance of the Horses

The horses that pull Sól's chariot hold symbolic meaning within Norse mythology. They represent:

- **The passage of time:** The horses' relentless journey across the sky mirrors the constant and cyclical nature of time. Their names, such as "Early Riser" and "Swift," emphasize the speed and inevitability of time's flow.
- **The power of the sun:** The horses' strength and endurance reflect the sun's life-giving energy and its vital role in sustaining life. They are a testament to the sun's power and its importance in Norse cosmology.
- **The struggle against darkness:** Sól's constant pursuit by the wolf Sköll, who seeks to devour her, represents the eternal struggle between light and darkness. The horses' speed and determination in pulling the chariot symbolize the sun's resilience in the face of this threat.

## Legends of Sól and Her Horses

Several myths and legends are associated with Sól's chariot and her horses. One of the most prominent is the story of the solar eclipse. In Norse mythology, solar eclipses were believed to occur when Sköll, the wolf, temporarily caught up with Sól and attempted to devour her<sup>2</sup>. This myth reflects the ancient Norse understanding of this celestial phenomenon and their attempt to explain it through their mythology.

The Vikings believed that when the two wolves, Sköll and Hati (who chases the moon), caught up with the Sun and Moon, they would swallow them, and all the stars would disappear from the sky<sup>9</sup>. It would be a signal that Ragnarök, the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, was about to begin, and that the end of the world was at hand<sup>9</sup>. However, even after Ragnarök, a new sun, Sól's daughter, will rise and continue the cycle of light<sup>10</sup>. This emphasizes the cyclical nature of time and the enduring power of the sun in Norse cosmology.

It is interesting to compare Sól's story with that of Phaeton from Greek mythology<sup>11</sup>. Phaeton, the son of the sun god Helios, secretly took his father's chariot for a ride but lost control of the horses, causing widespread destruction on Earth. This myth, like the story of Sól and Sköll, highlights the dangers associated with the sun's power and the importance of maintaining control over it.

## Scholarly Interpretations

Scholarly interpretations of Sól's chariot and horses often focus on their symbolic significance. Some scholars suggest that the horses represent the duality of human nature, with one horse representing noble impulses and the other representing baser desires<sup>12</sup>. This interpretation draws parallels with Plato's chariot allegory, where the soul is depicted as a charioteer struggling to control two horses representing opposing forces.

Other interpretations focus on the horses' connection to the cyclical nature of time and the sun's role in maintaining order and stability in the cosmos<sup>13</sup>. In Hinduism, the horses of the sun symbolize the seven celestial horses that pull the sun's chariot, each representing different meters of the Vedas<sup>13</sup>. This interpretation adds another layer of symbolism to the horses, linking them to the sacred texts and the cosmic order.

## Conclusion: A Testament to the Sun's Power

The horses that pull Sól's chariot are more than just mythical creatures; they are symbols of the sun's power, the passage of time, and the eternal struggle between light and darkness. Their presence in Norse mythology highlights the importance of the sun in the lives of the Norse people and their deep reverence for this celestial body. The chariot itself, with its fiery origins and potential connection to a lunisolar calendar, further emphasizes the sun's power and its role in the cosmos. The myths and legends associated with Sól and her horses, such as the story of the solar eclipse and the comparison with the Greek myth of Phaeton, provide further insights into the Norse understanding of the sun and its significance.

While their names and specific attributes may vary across different sources, their enduring strength and unwavering dedication to their task remain a constant, serving as a testament to the sun's enduring power and its vital role in the Norse cosmos. The horses, whether they are Árvakr and Alsviðr or Skinfaxi and Hrimfaxi, embody the cyclical nature of time, the struggle against darkness, and the triumph of light and life. Their legacy continues to inspire awe and wonder, reminding us of the enduring power of the sun and its vital role in our world.

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