

Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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Odin and Frigg on Hlidskjalf
R.E. Kepler, 1902

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Introduction

“Any wise commentator on Norse mythology ought to begin by acknowledging frankly that we know rather little about it. Many modern descriptions rely heavily on the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, and especially on the fluent and persuasive account of the gods in *Gylfaginning*, its first major section. But Snorri was writing in the 1220s, when Iceland had been a Christian country for two centuries, and his *Prologus* begins with an unambiguous authorial statement of the Christian view of creation.”

— John McKinnell, *Both One and Many* (1994), p.13.

A wide range of sources gathered from across Northern Europe from the emergence of the Germanic tribes in the historic record to the close of the heathen era and beyond attest that the Germanic people widely venerated a goddess personifying the Earth under a variety of names. A closer examination of these scattered accounts unveils many common threads which demonstrate the continuity of her character for over a millennium, indicating that these sources speak of one figure known by many different designations. Under whatever local title she appears, this goddess is most often identified as Odin's wife and, as far as the records allow us to know, the mother of other prominent members of the Germanic pantheon. A broader comparison across the Indo-European diaspora demonstrates that this Germanic Earth-Mother bears much in common with her Indo-European counterparts, indicating that her persona and associated mythology have ancient pre-Germanic roots. This is not to suggest in any way that this thoroughly Germanic figure is identical to or even an aspect of the so-called prehistoric Divine Feminine, Universal Great Goddess or Mother Goddess figure widely acknowledged in scholarship today. Such speculation is beyond the scope of this investigation. *To be clear, the present study is concerned only with the presence of a personified Earth-Mother within the historic Germanic territories.*

Today, many scholars recognize the importance in popular primitive belief of *hieros gamos* or “sacred marriage,” a cosmic coupling in which a masculine Heaven mates with a feminine Earth, commonly exemplified in the Greek myth of Ouranos and Gaia.¹ From the union of a male god and a female earth comes the harvest of fertility of the cosmos.² It is most often seen as a natural and common development in many agrarian societies, where, in a very real sense, the Earth is the source of all life. Flora and fauna alike appear to emerge from her womb, and all life is dependent upon her for its existence. The sky is then imagined as a husband and father, whose vital warmth and fluids are required to fertilize his wife, the earth, and create new life. At times the symbolism is overt, as in the Greek myth of Zeus and Danae, where he seduces her in the form of golden rain. In some traditions, the god may be replaced by his representative on earth, often the king. In a Sumerian poem, the earth imagery is clear: “Great Lady, the king will plow your vulva, I, Dumuzi the king, will plow your vulva.”³ As Mircea Eliade has shown, versions of this myth are prominent in Oceania from Indonesia to

¹ Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (2001), p. 13.

² Thomas DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (1999), p. 55-56.

³ Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Cramer, *The Courtship of Dumuzi and Inanna, Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, (1983), p. 37.

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Micronesia, as well as in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.⁴ Other scholars have detected similar patterns in Near Eastern and Old European mythologies,⁵ demonstrating that *hieros gamos* played an important role in many indigenous religions across the globe. Within the Germanic sphere, Thomas DuBois observes:

“Tacitus’s description of the Nerthus cult in the first century A.D. depicts a ritual possibly related to the *hieros gamos* tradition: the goddess Nerthus is paraded through the vicinity in a wagon accompanied by her priest. ...Skaldic poets of the Viking Age also describe Óðinn as the bridegroom of Jorð (Earth), a fact which would tie him to the *hieros gamos* complex as well.”

Nor is this understanding recent. As early as 1829, Finnur Magnússon, wrote:

“Ultimately most pagan people came to imagine the sky as the Earth's husband, as it seems to rest upon the earth and fertilize it with ‘Warmth.’⁶ This presumably literal god of heaven was assumed to be the creative Principle of Nature with the Earth as its receiver. ...Thus for example, with us Odin (who owed his existence to the Universal or Supreme God) was considered the world’s All-father, and Frigga or Earth as All-mother.”⁷

In 1873, Edward B. Tylor in his classic work, *Primitive Culture*, noted that “the idea of the earth as a mother is more simple and obvious, and no doubt for that reason more common in the world, than the idea of heaven as a father.” Underlying Tylor’s argument was the principle of evolution applied to the development of human culture, a common theoretical perspective during the last half of the nineteenth century. While Tylor likely had no intention of establishing Mother Earth as a major figure in primitive world religion, this however, was the effect of his work, particularly in studies of Native American belief.⁸ Albrecht Dietrich’s *Mutter Erde* (1905) helped to popularize this argument, “bringing the Mother Earth figure into the arena of the worldwide study of religion and culture,”⁹ thereby influencing such later scholars as E.O. James and Mircea Eliade.¹⁰

As the science of comparative mythology gained steam in the latter half of the nineteenth century, others expanded upon these simple observations, at first confined to European and Near Eastern religions, but now with an eye to the whole world, expounding evolutionary theories to explain how, when and where the concept of an Earth-Mother first emerged. For this purpose, so-called primitive religions with no discernible connections to the ancient religions of Europe and the Near East were brought to bear. Such scholars left the fertile fields of Indo-European mythology and ventured far into the darker realms of mythogony, the origins of mythology, a much more speculative

⁴ See *The Sacred and the Profane*, tr. Willard Trask (1959), pp. 147-151 and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (1958), pp. 239 - 262.

⁵ Such as T. H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (1961), pp. 62–64; Sir James Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (1919-1925); and Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, (1982).

⁶ *Varmestoffet*, lit. “warm-stuff”, an invisible substance that creates heat according to a now obsolete scientific theory, comparable to radiation today.

⁷ *Den förste November, den förste August*, p. 129. Translated from Danish.

⁸ Sam D. Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (1987), pp. 107 ff.

⁹ Gill, *ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰ Olof Pettersson, *Mother Earth: An Analysis of the Mother Earth Concepts According to Albrecht Dietrich* (1967).

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branch of human psychology. Fixated on the supposed origin and development of religion itself, the scope of their arguments soon turned from the historic character of attested goddesses to the universal nature of a Divine Feminine— in other words from the study of actual mythology to theoretical mythogony, the error of the nature mythologists who saw all gods and goddesses narrowly as personifications of natural and psychological phenomena. What was actually attested in Indo-European and Near Eastern mythologies was thus extrapolated backwards and applied to times and places it was not; gods and goddesses of disparate natures were seen as hypostases of a single universal Sky-Father and Earth-Mother. All deities were forced into this mold, regardless of their culture of origin. Unfortunately, this premise still underlies much scholarship into Germanic mythology today.

From Tylor's general insight, a parallel theory took root concerning the very rise of religion itself. In 1955, Erich Neumann, influenced by the work of psychologist Carl Jung, advanced the concept of a universal "Great Mother" goddess, who reigned as the dominant religious force before the concept of a supreme male deity had developed.¹¹ E. O. James, author of *The Cult of the Mother Goddess* (1959), expanded upon this, stating that only when the function of the male became apparent in the physiological process of procreation was the primordial Mother Goddess assigned a male companion. Other prominent scholars soon accepted the theory and argued that recurring symbols in early prehistoric art were associated with her cult.¹² Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who drew heavily on Neumann's study, went further locating this goddess in a concrete cultural context, suggesting that the late Paleolithic period was dominated by matriarchal societies who venerated powerful mother goddesses.¹³ She assembled a wealth of evidence, primarily female figurines and decorative patterns, in support of her theory, outlining the basis for it in this manner:

"It was the sovereign mystery and creative power of the female as the source of life that developed into the first religious experiences. The Great Mother Goddess who gives birth to all creation out of the holy darkness of her womb became the metaphor for Nature herself."¹⁴

Over the course of her career, Gimbutas developed this argument further, placing increasing emphasis on a unified Goddess, more powerful than any male god, who dominated Paleolithic and Neolithic religion prior to a series of invasions by Indo-European tribes with their patriarchal institutions.¹⁵ In time, individual goddesses of various cultures came to be seen as emanations of this single, universal Great Goddess, whose womb generated all life. In the Germanic field, Hilda Ellis Davidson, Carolyne Larrington and Richard North, among others, have espoused this theory. Christopher R. Fee with David Leeming in *Gods, Heroes, & Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* (2001), p. 82, state the case quite plainly:

"Tacitus reported the existence of an earth-mother called Nerthus, a mysterious goddess associated specifically with fertility. In fact, it seems very likely that the chief deity among the early Germanic people was none other than the great earth-mother— the great goddess known in almost every

¹¹ Hilda Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (1997), p. 2

¹² Davidson, *ibid.*

¹³ Sandra Billington and Miranda Green, editors. *The Concept of the Goddess* (1996), p. 19.

¹⁴ *The Civilization of the Goddess*, (1991), p. 222.

¹⁵ Billington and Green, *ibid.*, p. 19.

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civilization throughout the world— echoes of whom in her various manifestations make up the bulk of the later Norse goddesses. Frigg, Freya, Sif, Idun, and even the primordial Jörd are simply aspects of the same great goddess. As war-gods replaced nature goddesses as chief among the pantheon, the great goddess seems to have been split up into lesser component parts.”

In its most mature form, the theory holds that the Great Goddess ruled over a balanced matrilineal society until, in the course of time, powerful empires arose in the Middle East and in Southern Europe, whose warring rulers invaded and conquered their agrarian neighbors. Then such groups as the Indo-Europeans, with their militant male deities and their dominant Sky-Father, were said to have engulfed and subjugated the peaceful cult of the Great Mother Goddess. These were people who literally worshipped “the lethal power of the blade” as Gimbutas wrote— the power to take life rather than create it.¹⁶

In the last few decades, modern feminism has provided the context for study and attempted to redefine or ‘rebalance’ the relationship between male/female aspects of deity. Typical of the more radical expressions of this theology is the belief that the Divine Feminine was somehow lost or deliberately repressed by institutional religions dominated by patriarchal male deities.¹⁷ Evidence from many cultures around the world has been brought to bear in support of this theory, but all too often continuity was taken for granted without paying sufficient attention to the background and context of the material.¹⁸ In regard to her seminal work *When God Was a Woman* (1976), a book which “sought to reclaim deity as female” now seen as instrumental in the rise of modern feminist theology in the 1970s and 80s, sculptor and art historian Merlin Stone, freely admitted “when I first began seriously researching and writing *When God Was a Woman*, in the late sixties, . . . my goal was to show how narrow and binding our society’s images of women were.”¹⁹ — a goal more apparent in the book’s original title, *The Paradise Papers: The Suppression of Women's Rites*, when it first saw print in the United Kingdom. Of such works, Lotte Motz in *Faces of the Goddess* (1997) remarked: “One gains the impression that the scholars set out in their endeavor with an already fixed belief in the existence of a primordial, maternal, all-encompassing and sovereign deity.” She added, “the claims concerning the glory and decline of the goddess cannot be substantiated. Many of the assertions are speculative. Documentation is sparse; references frequently limited to authors who share the vision.” Motz concluded:

“Since the ‘Goddess’ appears to satisfy the needs of many modern women, it might be inferred that the concept was constructed for just this purpose in modern times. The idea of an archetypal Great Mother, however, was extant before the era of the modern women’s liberation movement,” (pp. 184-5).

Juliette Wood, sums up this view in *The Concept of the Goddess* (1996) saying, “the Goddess is only the latest manifestation of a view of culture which suggests a Golden Age, whose real meaning was suppressed by some powerful, restrictive force.” Thus we not only have cause to doubt the validity

¹⁶ Riane Eisler, “Reclaiming our Goddess Heritage” in *The Goddess Reawakening* (1989), p. 30.

¹⁷ Dawne McCance (1990), *Understandings of 'The Goddess' in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship*, pp. 167-73.

¹⁸ Davidson, *ibid.*, p. 4-12.

¹⁹ Shirley Nicholson, compiler. *The Goddess Re-Awakening* (1989), p. 1.

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of this theory of the universal origin of human religion, but the very existence of the “Great Goddess” herself. As Lotte Motz ably illustrates in her study of prominent goddesses across the globe, the worship of a Great Mother Goddess representing the Earth, now widely accepted in popular culture, was by no means a universal phenomenon. This fact, however, does not preclude the existence of such figures in individual cultures, as Motz demonstrated in her own studies into northern European paganism.²⁰

Within ancient Germanic studies today, several scholars have acknowledged the existence of an Earth-Mother figure, thereby proving that it is possible to identify such a goddess in the Old Germanic religion without presuming that her worship was universal in nature. While we find an actual goddess who personifies the earth in Old Norse mythology in the form of Thor's mother *Jörð*, many believe her origins are deeper still. For example, Rudolf Simek states: “In the late heathen period, as recorded in our oldest literary sources, *Jörð* appears to have only been known as Thor's mother, and she plays no further role as an earth-goddess — as she certainly once was.”²¹ Among recent scholars, there is little doubt that a goddess representing the Earth played an important role in the Indo-European religious tradition, from which the Germanic religion developed. In *The Oxford Companion to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World* (2006), J.P. Mallory and D.Q. Adams state:

“The sky god or ‘father sky’ is lexically the most secure deity and heads the pantheon of Greece and Rome. . . . Other than ruling the gods in respective pantheons, and serving as father to several other Indo-European deities, the sky god is also seen (at least in some traditions) to unite with ‘mother earth.’”

In support of this, the authors point out that “Heaven and Earth” regularly appear as a pair in the lists of deities invoked as witnesses to Hittite treaties; in the Vedic tradition, Dyaus the father is paired with Prthivi, the mother, who represent heaven and earth; in Greece, Zeus is “the father of the gods” and Gaia is “the mother of the gods” but they do not make a couple. Instead Zeus is portrayed as the standard consort of Demeter (*Ge-meter*, “Earth-mother”) and Semele, the mortal mother of Dionysus by Zeus, who are likely manifestations of the Indo-European Earth-Mother in origin. In union with Zeus, Demeter gives birth to Persephone who is intimately associated with the growth of crops and Semele gives birth to Dionysus, a deity of wine and vineyards. According to Herodotus (4, 59), the Scythians conceived of Earth as Zeus' wife. Scholars of comparative mythology believe these figures have a bearing on the study of the ancient Germanic religion, whose origins are assumed to lie in the murky Proto-Indo-European past. James C. Russell in *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, (1994) holds:

“The study of Germanic religiosity has always suffered from a paucity of reliable extant sources. However, the work of Georges Dumézil in the field of comparative mythology provides a framework through which this deficiency may be compensated in certain instances. Dumézil's comparative model

²⁰ For example, John McKinnell in *Meeting the Other in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, (2005), p. 204, writes: “Lotte Motz argues that *Svipdagsmál* is a ritual induction of the young hero into a mother-goddess cult.”

²¹ *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (1984), p. 179.

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of Indo-European societies posits the existence of a fundamental similarity in the ideological and sometimes the social structure among the ancient societies of India, Persia, Greece, Rome, and pre-Christian northern Europe. This association permits the careful application of evidence regarding a fundamental ideological concept or 'mythologem' found in one or more Indo-European societies to that mythologem as it exists in another Indo-European society. Through such a process of analogy, one may enhance the understanding of that mythologem in the latter society, for which the currently available documentation may be scanty or inconclusive. When Dumézil's model is applied to pre-Christian Germanic religiosity, various aspects of form and structure hitherto interpreted solely as local, Germanic phenomena, acquire a new dimension, derived from their association with the greater Indo-European family of peoples." (p. 107).

As Martin L. West demonstrates in *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007), among the Indo-Europeans the Earth-goddess is widely celebrated with the title of "mother," providing numerous examples from across the Indo-European spectrum.²² As we shall see in the following chapters, a wealth of documented evidence proves that this same figure not only survived, but thrived, in the religious traditions of its West Germanic branch—the branch attested by such languages as Old Norse, Old English, Old High German (OHG), Old Saxon, and Old Frisian, which are the forebears of modern Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, as well as the English, German, Low German (or *Plattdeutsch*), Dutch, and Frisian languages.²³ There Earth is frequently associated with powerful sky gods, particularly in the Old Icelandic literature which provides the best evidence for the pre-Christian faith in the region. That said, it bears repeating that the current work is *not* an effort to identify *any* Germanic goddess with a universal Mother Goddess, or to prove the existence of an Earth-Mother in the Proto-Indo-European era, nor to reduce the known Germanic goddesses into a single figure. This investigation solely seeks to examine the evidence for the prolonged veneration of a native Germanic goddess personifying the Earth. In Northern Europe, she is found under a number of familiar names, but most commonly identified as Odin's wife, allowing us to recognize her. Owing to Earth's close connection with her consort the Sky-Father in many Indo-European pantheons, her origins probably lie in the pre-Germanic era. The evidence, of course, must speak for itself.



Lady with the Mead Cup
Birka, Uppland, Sweden, 10th century

²² Martin L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007), p. 175ff.

²³ A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture, Rory McTurk ed. (2005), Ch. 10: Language, pp.173-189, by Michael Barnes, who adds that the "more distant relatives" of this branch "are languages descended from Latin — French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, etc; Greek; the Celtic tongues — Irish, Scottish, Gaelic, Welsh and Breton; Russian and other Slavic languages; and Sanskrit."