



Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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The Anglo-Saxon *Æcerbot*

Among the tribes who worship Nerthus, Tacitus lists the Anglii (ancestors of the English Angles). Therefore, it should come as no surprise when we find evidence of just such a procession in the earliest Old English records demonstrating that this practice survived among them into Christian times. The Anglo-Saxon *Æcerbot*,¹ an elaborate 11th century ritual intended to remedy unproductive land, is a mixture of prose directives and alliterative verse, probably intended for community performance.² The text includes four metrical prayers. After Tacitus' report on Nerthus, these superficially Christian but substantially pagan prayers are one of the clearest traces of Mother Earth in a Germanic source.³ The character of the ritual indicates a pagan communal procession honoring the earth goddess, and is supported by both literary and archeological evidence across the Germanic regions.

As recorded, the *Æcerbot* begins before sunrise with the removal of four pieces of sod, one from each side of a field. Oil, honey, and yeast are gathered, along with milk from every kind of animal, wood from every kind of tree except hardwood, and a piece of every herb, except burr, found on the land. These are sprinkled with holy water, which is allowed to drip on the clods, with the words: "Grow, and multiply, and fill the earth. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy spirit be blessed." They are then brought into a church, placed greenside toward the altar, and four masses are sung over them. Before sunset of the same day, the clods are then carried back to the field; four small wooden crosses each bearing the names of the four Evangelists are laid into the holes left by the removal of the sod. The saints' names are invoked and the turf is replaced, accompanied by additional prayers repeated nine times.

¹ Preserved in the *Exeter Book*, the full text of the ritual is provided by Grimm, *ibid.*, pp. 1236-1238.

² http://pages.unibas.ch/anglist/schiltz/aezs/papers/Marco_Fava.htm#34 (last viewed 7/27/2007).

³ M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, (Oxford, 2007), p. 177.

After bowing humbly nine times toward the east, the farmer utters an additional prayer to “earth and sky, and to the true Saint Mary.”⁴ Further prayers and gestures follow; then the farmer blesses seed obtained from an almsman given twice as much in return, and ritually prepares the plowing equipment by boring a hole in the beam of the plough, and filling it with incense, fennel, hallowed soap and hallowed salt. He then sets the seed on the plow and intones a prayer, clearly conscious of the *heiros gamos*, which begins:

*Erce, Erce, Erce, eorþan modor,
Geunne þe se alwalda ece drighthen,
Æcera wexendra and wridendra
Eaciniendra and elniendra, etc*

"Ecre, Ecre, Ecre, Mother Earth,
May the All-wielding eternal Lord
Make you yield growing and sprouting fields,
Pregnant growing and striving fields," etc.⁵

The plowman then cuts the first furrow, reciting another prayer which began with these words, *Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor*: “May you be well, Earth, Mother of men! May you be growing in the Embrace of God, filled with food for the benefit of men.”⁶ He then takes a loaf made from *ælces cynnes melo*, “every kind of grain” grown on the land, kneaded with milk and holy water, and places it in the first furrow continuing to pray. The ritual ends with the reciting of the Lord’s Prayer three times, with an appeal to God that every seed sown may sprout.⁷

Of this elaborate ritual, John D. Niles in *Old English Literature in Context* states:

"The rite would have been so dramatic a visual and auditory experience, from sunup to sundown, with the processions from the fields to the church and from the church to the fields, with the singing of the masses and the chanting of the prayers, that the attention of an entire community would have been riveted on the act of opening the fields."⁸

Such a thing is not easily forgotten through the generations. The prayer itself may have an Indo-European pedigree. A Greek version of the hymn is recorded by Hesiod (*Opera et Dies* [*works and Days*] c. 465-9 BC). There again, the earth-goddess is coupled with the sky-god.⁹ In the Anglo-Saxon *Æcerbot*, the Christian God takes the place of the old sky-god. The Earth is exhorted to become pregnant in his embrace. Both *eorþan modor* and *folde fira modor* resemble *Terra Mater*, the earth-goddess Nerthus whom the continental Anglii are said to have worshipped in the first century AD.¹⁰ The term *folde fira modor*, “earth mother of men”, should be compared further with *Germania 2* where Tacitus tells us the Germanic tribes descend from Tuisto, *dues terra editus*, “a god born from the earth.” This implies that at least one of Tacitus’

⁴ ll. 29-30: *Eorðan ic bidde and upheofon, and Pa soðan sancta Marian.*

⁵ Cambridge Press, 1997. p.250-1;

⁶ Richard North’s translation.

⁷ *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 6-8. contains a full translation of the text by Karen Louise Jolly.

⁸ (D.S. Brewer, 1980), p. 56

⁹ As quoted by West, *ibid*, p. 183.

¹⁰ North, *ibid.*, 251.

German informants believed that all the Germanic tribes descended from the earth.¹¹ From this and other evidence, Richard North concludes:

“...although a connection between the farming cultures represented in *Germania* and *Æcerbot* may seem less likely than an influence of the charm from this or another ecclesiastical source, the conception of the *folde fira modor* in this charm as lying *godes fæþme* (“in the embrace of God”) is not part of Christian doctrine and brings *Æcerbot* closer to *Skírnismál* and to other pre-Christian poems that reflect a common Germanic tradition of the earth.”

Hilda Ellis Davidson, writing in *Roles of the Northern Goddess*,¹² confirms this stating:

“From references to Earth (*folde*), Mother of men, and to earth bringing forth in God's embrace, together with appeals to St. Mary and the god of high heaven, it seems probable that this was originally addressed to a goddess who caused grain to sprout and grow, with a call to the sky god to send the necessary rain.”

It is evident to scholars that the Nordic oral tradition has a close relationship to those encountered in older non-Scandinavian works like the Old English *Widsith*, *Doer*, and *Beowulf*, and the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*, which date back to the ninth or tenth centuries.¹³ That the contents of these charms were conceptually connected to the Old Norse religion is generally taken for granted by scholars such as Ursula Dronke, author of the *Poetic Edda Vol. II: The Mythological Poems*,¹⁴ who in commenting on the use of the alliterative terms *ásom and alfar* (Aesir and Elves) in *Völuspá* 49 remarks: “The antiquity of this formula is suggested by an echo of it in an Old English Charm.” Likewise one may reasonably conclude that the veneration of the Earth Mother is equally ancient.

Despite some lingering doubts regarding the significance of the word *Erce* in the Old English *Æcerbot* charm, few scholars seriously doubt that the charm itself refers to a pre-Christian earth-goddess closely connected to related figures within the Germanic realm.¹⁵ Whether her name is *Erce* or not is moot. If *Erce* is a name, it is probably related to the name of a legendary figure found chiefly in Low Saxon districts, a divine dame known as *Herke* or *Harke* who flies through the country between Christmas and Twelfth-day, dispensing earthly abundance.¹⁶

A similar costumed tradition survives among the Anglo-Saxons. In some parts of England, the first Monday after Twelfth-day is still known as *Plough Monday* and marks the traditional start of the British agricultural year. In northern England, a plow is driven from house to house in a procession, often accompanied by musicians. An old woman or a boy dressed as an old woman known as *Old Bessy*, accompanied by a man dressed in calfskin known as the *Fool*, leads a gang of plowboys dressed in white shirts through the town collecting money. References to this tradition date back to the late 1400s, and have been recently revived in some towns with

¹¹ North, *ibid.*, p. 46; cp. the *Prologue* to Snorri's *Edda* which says “They reasoned the earth was alive....For this reason they gave it a name and traced their ancestry to it.”

¹² (Routledge, 1998), p. 62.

¹³ *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk; Terry Gunnell, Ch. 5: “Eddic Poetry,” p. 93.

¹⁴ (Clarendon Press, Oxford), 1997. p. 147.

¹⁵ As one example, Karen Louise Jolly in *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England*, (University of North Carolina, 1996) writes: “The word is untranslatable but appears to be a pre-Christian invocative phrase appealing to Mother Earth by this name. Alternately, it could be a corrupt form of *ecce* (behold).”

¹⁶ Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, Stalleybrass tr. p. 253-54.

great success. These processions may be seen as a resumption of very ancient customs, and may be related to the German legends of Frau Holda and Perchta.¹⁷ Some scholars believe this custom was brought into the Danelaw in the ninth century. Likewise, the custom of plowing up the doorposts of those who gave nothing to the plowboys at Shrovetide was practiced in Denmark until the 18th century.

The Text of the *Æcerbót*

Translation by Karen Louise Jolly. *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, MS Cotton Caligula, British Library A. VII, fol. 176a-178a, late tenth or early eleventh century.

Here is the remedy, how you may better your land, if it will not grow well or if some harmful thing has been done to it by a sorcerer [dry] or by a poisoner [lyblace].

Take then at night, before dawn, four sods from four sides of the land, and mark where they were before.

Then take oil and honey and yeast, and milk of each animal that is on the land, and a piece of each type of tree that grows on the land, except hard beams, and a piece of each herb known by name, except burdock [glappan] only, and put then holy water thereon, and drip it three times on the base of the sods, and say then these words:

Crescite, grow, et multiplicamini, and multiply, et replete, and fill, terre,
the earth. In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti sit benedicti. [In the
name of the father and the son and the holy spirit be blessed.] And the Pater
noster [Our Father] as often as the other.

And then bear the sods into church, and let a masspriest sing four masses over the sods, and let someone turn the green [sides] to the altar, and after that let someone bring the sods to where they were before, before the sun sets. And have made for them four signs of Christ [crosses] of quickbeam and write on each end: Matthew and Mark, Luke, and John. Lay that sign of Christ in the bottom of the pit [where each sod had been cut out], saying then: crux Matheus, crux Marcus, crux Lucas, crux sanctus Iohannes.

Take then the sods and set them down there on [the crosses], and say then nine times these words, Crescite [grow], and as often the Pater noster, and turn then to the east, and bow nine times humbly, and speak then these words:

Eastwards I stand, for mercies I pray,
I pray the great domine [lord], I pray the powerful lord,
I pray the holy guardian of heaven-kingdom,
earth I pray and sky
and the true sancta [holy] Mary

¹⁷ Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 68.

and heaven's might and high hall,
that I may this charm [galdor] by the gift of the lord
open with [my] teeth through firm thought,
to call forth these plants for our worldly use,
to fill this land with firm belief,
to beautify this grassy turf, as the wiseman said
that he would have riches on earth who alms
gave with justice by the grace of the lord.

Then turn thrice with the sun's course, stretch then out lengthwise and enumerate there the litanies and say then: Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus to the end. Sing then Benedicite with outstretched arms and Magnificat and Pater noster thrice, and commend it [the land] to Christ and saint Mary and the holy cross for praise and for worship and for the benefit of the one who owns that land and all those who are serving under him.⁴ When all that is done, then let a man take unknown seed from beggars and give them twice as much as he took from them, and let him gather all his plough tools together; then let him bore a hole in the beam [of the plough, putting in] incense and fennel and hallowed soap and hallowed salt. Take then that seed, set it on the plough's body, say then:

Erce, Erce, Erce, earth's mother,
May the all-ruler grant you, the eternal lord,
fields growing and flourishing,
propagating and strengthening,
tall shafts, bright crops,
and broad barley crops,
and white wheat crops,
and all earth's crops.
May the eternal lord grant him,
and his holy ones, who are in heaven,
that his produce be guarded against any enemies whatsoever,
and that it be safe against any harm at all,
from poisons [lyblaca] sown around the land.
Now I bid the Master, who shaped this world,
that there be no speaking-woman [cwidol wif] nor artful man
[craeftig man] that can overturn these words thus spoken.

Then let a man drive forth the plough and the first furrow cuts, say then:

Whole may you be [Be well] earth, mother of men!
May you be growing in God's embrace,
with food filled for the needs of men.

Take then each kind of flour and have someone bake a loaf [the size of] a hand's palm and knead it with milk and with holy water and lay it under the first furrow. Say then:

Field full of food for mankind,

bright-blooming, you are blessed
in the holy name of the one who shaped heaven
and the earth on which we live;
the God, the one who made the ground, grant us the gift of growing,
that for us each grain might come to use.

Say then thrice *Crescite in nomine patris, sit benedicti* [Grow in the name of the father, be blessed]. Amen and *Pater noster* three times.