Odin's Wife:
Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

by William P. Reaves © 2010

Conclusion

> "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 (SnE.), and especially on the fluent and persuasive account of the gods in *Gylfaginning* (Gylf.), its first major section. But Snorri was writing in the 1220's, when Iceland had been a christian country for two centuries, and his *Prologus* (Prol.) begins with an unambiguous authorial statement of the christian view of creation.
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> —From "Both One and Many" by John McKinnell)

The unbroken chain of evidence demonstrates that Odin and Frigg are most likely the Germanic analogs of the ancient Indo-European Sky-Father and Earth-Mother. Nothing bars this conclusion, other than the continued belief that Frigg and Jörd are separate enties, perpetuated by Snorri's *Gylfaginning.* To accept that Frigg and Jörd were indeed viewed as one, we must acknowledge that Snorri differed in his interpretation of the ancient heathen poetry on this point. Understandably, this is not easy for some to do. When considering this argument we must remember that Snorri wrote more than 200 years after the Christian conversion of Iceland, for a Christian audience that was supposed to be opposed to pagan worship. He opens his work with the Christian account of creation. He calls the gods men, and no where deviates from this view. It extends from the introduction to the conclusion of *Gylfaginning*. He only seeks to explain the poetic forms, which were already being forgotten in his day. In several instances, his explanation of a verse contradicts the words of the poems he quotes, and in some instances the verses he "quotes" deviate significantly from the same verse preserved in another source. His understanding of the older poetry is at times questionable, and is questioned in many places by modern scholars.

The evidence we have of the Norse gods is fragmentary. According to John McKinnell, when we look for genuinely heathen voices, there are three or perhaps four types of source:

a) Mythological Eddic poems
b) Skaldic verse
c) Picture stones
d) Contemporary Christian views of Norse heathenism

In contrast, Snorri's Edda is based in large part on Snorri's own understanding and interpretation of these older sources, some of which he quotes at length, and not necessarily an accurate reflection of heathen belief some two centuries earlier. However, there is no reason to believe that Snorri did not give as accurate and complete a picture of the heathen religion as it was known in his time. However, there is no guarantee that he understood them in the manner his heathen ancestors did. Since the poems themselves are much older than Snorri, and mostly composed by heathen skalds (and recently converted skalds), they naturally are a more accurate reflection of heathen concepts and beliefs. Current scholarship in this field started sporodically in the late 1700s. Since that time, our understanding of the poems has evolved exponentially. In the early 1800's and throughout most of the century the poems were regarded as derived from the "true" history of the Bible. Snorri's Christianized account was used to "prove" that. Another school held that the gods were simple personifications of natural phenomena. In the 19th century, this view began to change and was seriously challenged by many scholars who proposed an Indo-European origin, independent of Biblical roots, and much more developed than simple nature interpretations. By centuries end, they had won their case. In the 20th century, the poems were looked upon as literary creations and begun to be analyzed as written works, sometimes deconstructed to the point of absurdity. Mere ideas were presented as theories, and based on little more than a single passage.

Throughout the history of Eddic scholarship, Snorri's work, being easy to read and informative, has consistently been used as a control to interpret the older poems to a greater or lesser degree. Inconsistencies between the poems and Snorri are explained as variations. No one has seriously questioned the overall authority of Snorri's interpretations, although many scholars have questioned individual points. The common wisdom holds that Snorri had many Eddaic poems we do not have, but the evidence indicates that we possess more than he knew. His main sources in *Gylfaginning* are *Voluspa*, *Vafthrudnismal*, and *Grimnismal*, with references and citations to *Fafnismal* and *Alvismal*. Today, roughly 35 Eddaic poems are available to us for study. My contention is that Snorri did not necessarily understand his sources in the manner they were meant by those who composed them (and scholars agree to a point), and that the Eddic and Skaldic poems themselves should be seen as a more reliable source of heathen belief rather than the other way around. This recognition alone will help us get more meaning out of the poems, than is possible if we take Snorri as more reliable than his heathen sources. A more fruitful approach would be for us to study the evidence of the Eddaic poems independently, and then compare it to Snorri's text, not the other way around.

While much has been done in the twentieth century to broaden the research into individual goddesses, this research has tended to reduce their individual characteristics, interpreting them all as mere aspects of a single Great Mother Goddess theorized to have

existed in prehistoric times.[1] Frigg and Freyja, the two chief goddess figures of the Germanic pantheon, are often treated as one and the same entity, while most of the other named goddesses have been regarded as aspects of this united entity. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas opened up new possibilities in the field and aroused interest for the study of female deities through her research on the veneration of a Great Mother Goddess of the Stone Age. Other scholars followed, often reducing known goddesses into this prehistoric figure. In her work "Freyja, Great Goddess of the North," Britt-Mari Näsström defines the great goddess as "sometimes divided into two goddesses who are apprehended as mother-daughter or as two sisters" (p. 73). Her thesis concludes that there was only "one Great Goddess" in the Indo-European sphere, from which all other goddesses derive (p. 103). In her book *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, Hilda Ellis Davidson follows suit stating: "It seems likely that Idun, who guarded the golden apples which ensured perpetual youth to the gods, may be identical with Freyja, since she like Freyja is carried off on more than one occasion by the giants and has to be rescued by Loki. Moreover, the maiden Gerd, who may also represent Freyja, is offered golden apples when wooed by Frey in the poem *Skirnismál*" (p. 85). Ultimately she reduces all the northern goddesses into one great Northern Goddess, a conclusion apparent even in the title of her book.

In her perceptive presentation at the 2006 Medieval Saga Conference Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, notes that the hypothesis of one Great Goddess, although understandable for its times as a means of uniting the international women's movement, must now be seen as somewhat simple and overgeneralized. Even though gods from different places and societies share similar attributes and aspects, this need not be due to monogenesis, but can be attributed to common human psychology and aspiration more so than to the supposed shared roots of the gods.[2] She writes:

> "When looking through the relevant archaeological finds concerning the existence of goddesses and goddess-worship in Scandinavia, there are two things especially that catch the attention: One is that feminine deities seem to have been worshipped over a very long period of time – since the earliest references to such divinities seem to reach all the way back to the Stone- and Bronze-Age rock carvings in Norway and Sweden. The other is that there are certain recurrent strands and characteristics in these finds that seem to point to little or no change in concept over almost as long a period of time."

When dealing with archaeological finds from a non-literate cultural era, we have no way of knowing whether these deities had names and, if so, what they were. In spite of this, Ingunn Ásdísardóttir points out that many of these archaeological finds, especially the earlier ones, appear to have been connected with water, (i.e. were found in or near water), and seem to be connected to war and sacrifice. Therefore, it seems quite likely that this goddess may have been a fertility deity of the kind that later came to be defined as Vanir gods.

A strong tradition flows from ancient times regarding the marriage of the earth and sky. They are often depicted as a married couple and their union is known as the *heiros gamos*, or "sacred marriage." Many myths preserve the basic mytheme of a

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[1] Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, "Frigg and Freyja: One Great Goddess or Two?," Source: http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/ingunn.htm (last viewed 3/10/08).

[2] Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, ibid, p. 2

masculine sky impregnating a feminine earth. Within the Indo-European sphere, **Dyeus Pater* or Sky-Father is the oldest god whose name can be traced over a vast area.[3] Lexically, he is the most secure deity and heads the pantheons of Greece and Rome.[4] He serves as the father of several other Indo-European deities and unites with "mother earth," at least in some traditions.[5] This relationship is exemplified in *Rigveda,* the oldest Indo-European religious text, where Dyaus appears with his companion Prthivi, the Earth. In the sixth century BC, Pherecydes of Syros describes a wedding between two primal deities, Zas (Zeus) and Chthonie (the Earth spirit). Zas marries her and clothes her in a veil embroidered with land and sea to honor her as his bride.[6] Several of Zeus' consorts in later Greek mythology have names which can be traced to words meaning earth, including Demeter, Plataia, and Semele.[7] The same holds true in northern Europe. According to Herodotus (4, 59), the Scythians of northeastern Europe, "propitiate by worship … Zeus and the Earth, supposing that Earth is the wife of Zeus." Whereas the sky is known as father, among the Indo-Europeans, earth is widely celebrated under the title "Mother."[8] The Vedic Prthivi often carries the epithet "mother" especially when she is invoked with Dyaus the father. In Hittite, mother Earth (*annas Daganzipas*) is paired with the storm-god.[9] In ancient Greece, Ge was known as "the mother of all", "mother of the gods," the "all-mother," or simply as "the mother."[10]

In the Germanic realm, Mother Earth held a similar place. In *Germania*, chapter 2, Tacitus informs us that the Germanic tribes claim descent from an earth-born god.[11] In chapter 40, he says that no less than seven tribes worshiped Nerthus, who is *Terra Mater*, Mother Earth. Among them, Tacitus names the Anglii, who enter history as the Angles. Among the Anglo-Saxons, we find traces of her worship. In the *Æcerbot*, a charm to restore fertility to blighted land, earth is addressed as *Eorþan modor*, Mother Earth and *fira modor*, the mother of men. She is exhorted to become fertile, i.e. pregnant, *on Godes fæþme*, in God's embrace. Here the Christian God takes the place of the old sky-god.[12]

> *Hal wes þu, Folde, fira modor: beoþu growende on Godes fæþme, fodre gefylled firum to nytte.*
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> "Hail earth, mother of men! Be fertile in God's embrace filled with fodder for the benefit of men."

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[3] M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, (Oxford, 2007), p. 166.
[4] JP Mallory and DQ Adams, *Oxford Companion to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*, (Oxford, 2006), p. 431.
[5] Mallory and Adams, ibid, p. 432.
[6] Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda Volume II: The Mythological Poems*, (Oxford, 1997), p. 396. See also, West, ibid, p. 182.
[7] West, ibid, p. 182.
[8] West, ibid, p. 175.
[9] West, ibid, p. 176.
[10] Hes. *Op*. 563, Hymn. Hom. 30, 1, 17, Solon fr. 36, 4, Aesch. *Sept*, 16, [Aesch.] *Prom*. 90, Soph. fr. 269a, Eur. *Hipp*. 601, *Hel*, 40, fr. 182a, 839.7 etc. (after West, ibid, p. 176).
[11] "In ancient lays, their only type of historical tradition, they celebrate Tuisto, a god brought forth from the earth. They attribute to him a son, Mannus, the source and founder of their people." Translated by J. B. Rives, *Tacitus Germania*, (Oxford, 1999),
[12] Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 62; West, ibid, p. 177.

In the oldest heathen records of Scandinavia, the skaldic poems, we find the kenning "Odin's wife" used to denote the Earth. In his account of the development of religion in the *Prologue* to the *Prose Edda,* Snorri Sturluson writes that the generations after the Biblical Noah forgot the name of God and knew nothing of their Creator. They reasoned that the earth was alive, gave it a name, and traced their ancestry to it. Snorri tells us that earth is known as *Folde, Jörð, Hlóðyn* and Fjörgyn, but she plays little role in the mythology that follows. Instead, the role of Odin's wife is always occupied by Frigg there.

Jere Fleck, "The 'Knowledge-Criterion' in the Grimnismal: The Case Against Shamanism, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, pp. 46-65, 1971.

> "It has always been the problem of the student of primitive Germanic religion to distil the religiously significant out of the mash of documentation—a process often leading to divided opinion. Each of us is almost forced to develop some sort of overall attitude towards the material, based on patterns which seem to repeat themselves in certain texts, and then to subject further material to the results of these observations to see to see if our key will open the door. If it does, this supports the basic premise— if it does not we must either assume that the theoretic principle with which we are working is false, or that the sample under present investigation is at fault. No key has been discovered to date which opens every door— and external evidence assures us that our materials are not beyond suspicion. So we do not have to apologize for using this method— it remains the standard tool of the trade. "