



## Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

by William P. Reaves © 2010

### Frau Holle

“Deities, by their very nature, frequently attract numerous epithets and by-names, e.g. ‘Lord’, ‘deliverer’, ‘almighty’; as these will suffer differential survival among sister groups or replace existing names, references to what were once the same deity may be lost over time.”

—*The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*,  
J.P. Mallory and D.Q. Adams, (University of Oxford Press 2006), p. 423.

With one cult spread across at least seven northern European nations, the scale of *Terra Mater's* worship in the first century must have been massive.<sup>1</sup> Thus we must take notice when we discover a similar figure with a congruous range recorded in medieval German folklore and surviving in popular legends down to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Across Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are found a group of popular legends involving a faded heathen goddess associated with both the plow and the spinning wheel.<sup>2</sup> She appears under such names as Holde, Holle, Percht, and Bercht. Jacob Grimm collected these legends and first recognized them as the remnant memory of a pre-Christian goddess.<sup>3</sup> The same figure is sometimes known as Frau Gode or Gauden.<sup>4</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Viktor Waschnitius published a rich collection of these tales and the traditions surrounding them.<sup>5</sup> Because of the obvious resemblance of their

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. North, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Hilda Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Grimm, *ibid.*, ch. 13.4.

<sup>4</sup> Grimm, *ibid.*, pp.252-253; Lotte Motz who identifies Frau Göja (Fru Go, Fru Gude) of Northern Germany with Góí of the *Fornaldarsaga*, *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, notes the “striking similarity” between her and “the great ladies of the wintertime of the provinces of Germany — of whom the most important are Frau Holle and Frau Perchta,” *ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> *Perht, Holde und verwandte Gestalten* (Sitzungsberichte Kaiser Akademie. der Wissenschaften [Philo-Hist] 174), Vienna, 1913.

attributes and stories, scholars generally agree that these beings represent a single figure. Lotte Motz writes:

“Though many names are encountered, the creatures show such strong resemblances to one another that we may be sure of one basic configuration; she is a spirit of the woodland, a visitor to human dwellings in the winter season. She may inspect the order of the household, check on the behavior of children, and receive the offered gifts. She may punish or ordain fortune or misfortune for the coming year.”<sup>6</sup>

Motz passionately argues that these figures represent an earlier Germanic goddess of winter because of her association with Christmas and New Year.<sup>7</sup> But Hilda Davidson counters that this supposition is not supported by the evidence, since in the stories collected by Waschnitius her two main functions, spinning and plowing, are not predominantly winter activities. Davidson does not dispute the origin of this legendary figure in the pre-Christian religion, and aptly compares her to Nerthus, who is said to go around the fields and make them fruitful.<sup>8</sup> The legends of Frau Holle are especially prominent in Hesse and Thuringia, while those of her counterparts Frau Berchta are concentrated in the Alpine regions; those of Frau Werra in the Voigtland; and those of Frau Harke and Frau Gode in northern Germany.<sup>9</sup> A close comparison reveals little distinction among them. They are evidently one. Their identity is most plain in that they all make their rounds at the same time, during the Twelve-nights including Christmas and New Years.<sup>10</sup> In the stories of Frau Holle, her good nature predominates, while in the tales of Frau Berchta her bad nature is foremost.

In modern Germany, Thuringia is a free state in central Germany, bordered by the German states of Lower Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, Bavaria, and Hesse. The eastern part of Thuringia is a vast lowland plain cut through by the Saale river flowing northward from its headwaters in Bavaria. Thuringia's most prominent geographical feature is a mountain chain in the southwest known as the Thuringian Forest (*Thüringer Wald*), famous for Wartburg Castle where Martin Luther stayed for some time in exile. One of Germany's oldest towns, Merseburg is located upstream along the Saale in the modern German state of Saxony-Anhalt, ten miles south of Halle, the home of thriving Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements centered around the salt mines there. The biggest part of Saxony-Anhalt consists of fertile plains used primarily for agriculture.<sup>11</sup> These areas have proven to be fertile grounds for the preservation of pre-Christian seasonal rituals, which the Church tried in vain to stamp out for centuries. So widespread is this folk-belief in Frau Holle, it is probably rooted in the ancient pagan religion of the area.

Frau Holle is an ancient figure. The name Hludana is found in five Latin inscriptions: three from the lower Rhine (CIL XIII 8611, 8723, 8661), one from Münstereifel (CIL XIII 7944) and one from Beetgum, Frisia (CIL XIII 8830) all dating from 197 AD- 235 AD. Many attempts have been made to interpret this name. The most steadfast connections are with Frau Holle and Hulda on one hand, and the Old Norse Hloðyn, a name for the earth, Thor's mother, on the other.<sup>12</sup> Frau Holle (also Holde, Hulda, Hulle, and Holl) known from popular legends and fairy-tales distributed extensively throughout Hesse and Thuringia is manifested as a superior being

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<sup>6</sup> Lotte Motz, *The Beauty and the Hag*, (Fassbaender, 1993), p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> Lotte Motz, (1984) 'The Winter Goddess: Percht, Holde, and Related Figures,' *Folklore* 95, 151-166; *The Beauty and the Hag* (Faesbender, 1993), pp. 124-131.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, *ibid.* p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Lotte Motz, *ibid.* (1993) see esp. chapter VI2.1: *The Great Goddess of the Countryside*, p. 124-125.

<sup>10</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 273.

<sup>11</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merseburg>

<sup>12</sup> Rudolph Simek, *The Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, sv. Hludana, pp. 154-155.

with a helpful disposition who is never cross unless she discovers disorder in household affairs. The legend of Frau Holle is found as far as the Voigtland, past the Rhön mountains in northern Franconia, in the Wetterau up to the Westerwald and from Thuringia to the frontier of Lower Saxony.<sup>13</sup> She is represented as a being of the sky girdling the earth. When it snows, she is making her bed and the feathers fly. Fog is said to be smoke from her hearth.



She haunts lakes and fountains and is seen as a fair White Lady bathing in the water and disappearing, a trait in which she resembles Nerthus.<sup>14</sup> She too drives about in a wagon, sometimes requiring the help of a peasant to repair it. When he carves a new linchpin for her, she pays him with the cast off wood chips which turn into gold if he was wise enough to take them. Her annual progress falls between Christmas and Twelfth-day. Frau Holle is a spinster. The cultivation of flax is assigned to her. She presents industrious maids with spindles and fills their reels overnight. She sets a lazy spinner's distaff on fire or soils and breaks the thread. In Grimm's fairy-tales, an industrious girl whose spindle drops into her fountain is richly rewarded with an apronful of gold, while her lazy sister, who attempts to recreate this good fortune for herself, is returned home covered in soot. When Frau Holle enters the country at Christmas, the distaffs are well-stocked and left standing for her inspection.<sup>15</sup> If she finds everything as it should be, she pronounces her blessing, and if not, her curse. In Thuringia, the grey-haired Frau Holle will leave a gift by the distaff on New Year's Eve, but in the villages of Franconia, she smears

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<sup>13</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 267.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 268.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 269-270.

the distaffs of slovenly girls with excrement.<sup>16</sup> The demands of the goddess vary by region. At certain times (such as during the Twelve-nights, on Saturday night and all day Sunday, or other holy days), no flax may be worked or Frau Holla will come.<sup>17</sup> In the Rhön mountains, farmwork is forbidden on Hulla's Saturday. No one is permitted to hoe, spread manure, or "drive the team afield."<sup>18</sup>

In nearly identical legends from High German regions including Swabia, Alsace, Switzerland, Bavaria, and Austria, the names *frau Berchte*, *frau Berchta*, or *Perchta* are most common. Although her name suggests a benign being —Bercht means the "bright" one —she is rarely represented as such. There, she is often described as an old hag with long teeth and she too has the oversight of spinners. Like Frau Holle, she makes her rounds between Christmas and New Year's Day. Whatever spinning she finds unfinished on the last day of the year, she spoils. In Tyrol, Frau Perchta will visit and provide young brides with thread or yarn; they must finish their spinning by Christmas or else their distaffs will be set in disarray. Of a distaff in disorder, it is said: *da nistet die Perchta drin*, "Perchta sits within."<sup>19</sup> She may visit the spinning rooms on the night before Twelfth-day, tossing empty reels in through the window with the demand that they all be filled in a short period of time. If her demands are not met, she breaks and befouls the flax. From Langendembach in the Thuringian Forest comes a story that tells of an old woman who refused to quit working on the eve of Twelfth-day, complaining "Perchta brings me no shirts, I must spin them myself." At that, the window flew open and Perchta threw some empty spools into the room demanding that they all be spun full in an hour's time. Terrified, the spinster spun a few rounds on each spool, and then threw them all into a nearby brook. With this, Perchta was appeased.<sup>20</sup> On Lake Zürich, she is called "*de Chungere*" because she puts knots (*chungel*) in the yarn of slothful girls. In the Voigtland, Frau Werra (perhaps derived from "*gewirrt*" describing "tangled" or shaggy hair) holds a strict inquiry on New Year's Eve whether all the distaffs are spun off. If not, she defiles them. Other tales from Thuringia tell of peasants encountering Perchta on their travels between towns on *Perchtennacht*, Perchta's Night.<sup>21</sup> She appears at night at crossroads as a tall stately woman dressed in white beside a broken plow or cart surrounded by weeping children. She requests some service of a passerby, typically aid in repairing her broken plow or wagon, and offers to pay those who help her with wooden chips left over from the mending. The unsuspecting peasant typically disdains the chips, only taking one or two to be polite, but soon discovers to his delight and chagrin that however many chips he accepted have now become gold. When he returns to the spot to search for more, he can find no trace of her.

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<sup>16</sup> Wachnitius, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, *ibid.* 115, cp. Grimm.

<sup>18</sup> Grimm, p. 270.

<sup>19</sup> Wachnitius, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 275-276.

<sup>21</sup> In Hesse, the Thursday before Christmas is known as *Hollenabend*, Holle's Eve.



Clearly related to these legends are the folktales of a “White Lady” or white-robed maiden who appears in the mountains. On the Launberg in Upper Hesse, she appears at sunrise sitting on the hillside with her spinning wheel, wheat spread out to dry beside her on a white cloth. A baker passing by took some of the grains with him and at home found nothing but gold. The same is told of a peasant near Friedigerode. On the Boyneburg, a poor shepherd saw a snow-white maiden sitting in the sunlight beside the castle door. On a white cloth spread before her lay uncracked pods of flax. He picked up and admired the pods, while unbeknownst to him a few of the seeds fell into his shoe. The maiden smiled at him, but said nothing. As the shepherd returned home, one of his feet began to bother him and when he removed his shoe, six grains of gold rolled out into his hand. On the Otomannsberg near Geismar, a maiden dressed in snow-white garments, holding a bunch of keys is said to appear every seven years.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, legend holds that a treasure is buried beneath the castle by Wolfartsweiler, where every seventh year, when white lilies are in bloom, a white maiden with plaited black hair appears, wearing a golden girdle and holding a bunch of keys on her belt or in her hand. She shows herself to children and is said to leave them gifts of food or gold. At Osterode, every Easter before sunrise, a white maiden appears at the castle there, washing a large set of keys in the brook. Once she took a poor weaver into the ruins and picked three white lilies for him, one of which he placed in his cap. When he returned home, the lily had become pure gold and silver, which he traded to the Duke for a pension. The Duke placed the lily in his princely coat of arms. Three lilies also appear on the right side of the coat of arms of Fulda in Hesse. On a hill near Langensteinbach, a white woman is said to appear in the forest near the long-ruined Church of St. Barbara at leap-year. Dressed in a white gown and green shoes, with a bunch of keys at her side, she once beckoned from the abandoned church choir to a young girl. Her hands and face were white as snow, and her hair raven black. She held a bouquet of blue flowers in her hand. Terrified, the girl ran to fetch her

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<sup>22</sup> In the *Poetic Edda*, keys are kept by the lady of the house, cp. *Drymskviða* 16 and 19; *Rígsþula* 23.

father and brothers working outside, but when they arrived, the white maiden was gone. Such stories are heard everywhere in Germany.<sup>23</sup>

Frau Holle is also connected with prophecy. Near Hörselberg in Thuringia, maidens place new fiber on their distaff on Christmas Eve, when Frau Holle begins her rounds. A local rhyme begins: *So manches Haar, so manches gutes Jahr*, “For every thread, a good year shall be had.” The work must be finished off by Epiphany when she returns, or else, as the rhyme says: *So manches Haar, so manches böses Jahr*, “For every thread, a bad year shall be had.”<sup>24</sup> On Christmas Day, a bowl of milk with spoons crossed over it is left out for her. When the members of the household return from church, the position of the spoons foretell the family’s fortune in the coming year.<sup>25</sup> Especially for the days of the Nativity (thus Yule), the church railed against such customs as participating in processions, “preparing a table for Perchta”, and going about with “incense, cheese, a rope, and mallets” on “the eighth day of the Nativity of our Lord”<sup>26</sup>

On her feast-day special foods are eaten. One record from 1760 specifies that no leguminous plants may be consumed when Frau Holla makes her rounds during the Twelve-nights.<sup>27</sup> In folk-tales of Orlagau, near the Saale, if Frau Perchta finds that anyone has not eaten *zemmede*, a cake made of milk and flour on the night before Twelfth-day, she cuts him open, removes any other food she finds inside, and replaces it with straw before sewing him up with a plowshare as her needle.<sup>28</sup> On the last day of the year, the Thuringians serve dumplings and herring. In the Voigtland on that evening, everyone must eat *polse*, a thick pap of flour and water prepared in a particular way. If anyone omits this dish, Frau Werra rips his body open.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Berchta’s day must be kept with a traditional meal of gruel and fish.<sup>30</sup> If anyone partakes of another dish this day, she cuts his belly open and sews up the wound using a plowshare as her needle. In Bavaria, greasy cakes are baked and eaten on the eve of the Epiphany, so if Frau Berchta attempts to cut anyone open, her knife will slide off.<sup>31</sup>

As a holdover from the old heathen religion, she appears to have been demonized by the new faith. Whereas the Romans assimilated her, Christian religious texts denounce her worship. It is said of Frau Holle that she flies through the air with witches in her train. The ninth century *Canon Episcopi* censors women who claim to have ridden with a “crowd of demons.”<sup>32</sup> Burchard's later recension of the same text expands on this in a section titled *De arte magica*:

“Have you believed there is some female, whom the stupid vulgar call Holda [or, in some manuscripts, *strigam Holdam*, the witch Holda], who is able to do a certain thing, such that those deceived by the devil affirm themselves by necessity and by command to be required to do, that is, with a crowd of demons transformed into the likeness of women, on fixed nights to be required to

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<sup>23</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 962-5.

<sup>24</sup> Washinitius, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> Waschintius, *ibid.* pp. 36, 48, 57, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Hermann Usener, *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, 1889, cited by Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, *The Religion of the Teutons*, p. 274.

<sup>27</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* 272.

<sup>28</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 274.

<sup>29</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 273.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Thor’s meal of *síldr ok hafra*, “herring and oats” in *Hárbarðsljóð* 3.

<sup>31</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* 277.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted by Lotte Motz in *The Beauty and the Hag*, p. 128.

ride upon certain beasts, and to themselves be numbered in their company? If you have performed participation in this unbelief, you are required to do penance for one year on designated fast-days.”<sup>33</sup>

The Codex of Ausburg from the fifteenth century states: “Diana who is commonly known as *Fraw Percht* is in the habit of wandering through the night with a host of women.” A 16<sup>th</sup> century fable recorded by Erasmus Alberus speaks of “an army of women” with sickles in hand sent by Frau Hulda. Thomas Reinesius in the 17<sup>th</sup> century speaks of Werra of the Voigtland and her “crowd of maenads.”<sup>34</sup> And in 1630, a man was convicted at a witch trial in Hesse for having ridden in the Wild Hunt of Frau Holle.<sup>35</sup> She is clearly identified as a goddess of the old religion. In 1494, Stephanus Lanzkrana in *Die Hymelstrass*, admonishes those who believe in “*frawn percht, frawn hold, herodyasis* or *dyana*, the heathen goddess.”<sup>36</sup> Martin of Amberg says that meat and drink are left standing for her, indicating a sacrifice.

Vivid visual descriptions of her may allude to a popular costumed portrayal, perhaps as part of a seasonal festival or holiday drama. In 1522, in *The Exposition of the Epistles* at Basel, Martin Luther writes:

“Here cometh up Dame Hulde with the snout, to wit, nature, and goeth about to gainstay her God and give him the lie, hangeth her old ragfair about her, the straw-harness; then falls to work and scrapes it featly on her fiddle.”

According to Oberlin, Luther compares Nature rebelling against God to the heathenish Hulda “with the frightful nose.”<sup>37</sup> Martin of Amberg calls her Percht *mit der eisen nasen*, “with the iron nose.”<sup>38</sup> Vintler calls her Frau Percht with the long nose and a MHG manuscript refers to her as *Berchten mit der langen nas*.



She is known as *Trempe*, the trampling one, and *Stempe*, the stamping one. She and her train are expected to make a racket. Costumed Christmas traditions are well-known throughout northern Europe, including England and Scandinavia. In some regions, Perchta and Berchta are directly associated with them. On *Perchtennacht*, the night before Epiphany, the young men of Salzburg leap wildly, shouting in her honor. The higher the leap, the higher next year’s crop will

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<sup>33</sup> Burchard of Worms; *Canon Episcopi*; Book 19, the Corrector, Chapter 5, Question 70 (Migne, P.L., vol 140, p. 962).

<sup>34</sup> Motz, *The Beauty and the Hag*, *ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>35</sup> Waschnitius, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> Waschnitius, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted from Grimm, *ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>38</sup> *Gewissensspeigel*, mid 14<sup>th</sup> century.



grow. This behavior is called *Perchtanlauf*, “Perchta leaping,” and is also customary in Tyrol.<sup>39</sup> Such behavior is immediately reminiscent of the acrobatic figures on the Bronze Age petroglyphs and similar figures cast in bronze dated to Zealand in 600 AD, as noted above. Like many figures found in prehistoric northern European iconography, Perchta’s followers, known as *Perchtan*, personify horned and furred beasts, perhaps meant to represent mountain goats. The name Perchta may be related to *berg*, *perg* meaning “mountain.”<sup>40</sup> In Pinzgau, they are known as *Berchtan* and roam the village in disguise carrying cow-bells and cracking whips to drive the witches out. Sometimes a grotesque image of the local goddess was carried about.<sup>41</sup> In the north of Switzerland, Berchteli’s Day (the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> of January) is a day for general merrymaking. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was still the custom of young men to intercept others and press them to take wine. This was known as “conducting to Berchtold.” Berchtold is a masculine form of the name Berchta, suggesting a pair: Berchta and Berchtold, even as one encounters Nerthus and Njörd, Frey and Freyja, etc.<sup>42</sup>



Similarly, many of the costumed Christmas visiting traditions of northern Europe involve male and female counterparts, including the well-known St. Lucia tradition, typified by a young girl in white wearing a candle-crown. This decidedly Christian image is countered by the

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<sup>39</sup> Cp. Waschnitius, pp. 37, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Motz, *The Beauty and the Hag*, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Waschnitius *ibid.* pp. 37, 57, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 279; This is not uncommon in Indo-European mythology. In Greek and Roman sources, M.L. West notes a Phoibos and Phoibe, Hektaos and Hektate, Janus and Jana, Liber and Libera, Fauna and Faunus, among many others. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, (Oxford, 2007), p. 140.



continued use of the term *Lusse långnatt* (Lusse long-night), which suggests an association with the Winter Solstice. In Västergötland and Småland, the Lucia tradition involves men dressing up as old women and women dressing up as old men known as *Lussegubbar* and *Lussegummar* respectively. These figures wear white shirts accented by belts, shoes and leggings made of straw. In western Norway, *Lussia* is regarded as a dangerous female troll who is supposed to visit farms on December 13<sup>th</sup>, sometimes accompanied by a group of spirits known as *Lussiferd* or the *Lussi-ride*. This was enacted by members of the community dressed in animal skins and horns, who went from house to house demanding food. The most recurrent of these costumed Yuletide visiting traditions is that of the *Julebukk* (Yule-buck), often accompanied by a female companion the *Julegeit* (Yule-goat), both wearing fur-skins and horns. These figures travel from house to house at the head of a lively procession singing *julebukke* songs. These processions often include other traditional figures, such as St. Stephan or Helm-Stephan, dressed in straw, and enact short dramas akin to the English Mummer's Plays. A scene in the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Þorleifs þáttur jarlsskálds* may be the first literary reference to this custom. In this tale, Þorleif enters Jarl Hákon's hall on Christmas in disguise, seeking revenge. He stumbles in on crutches, giving him the appearance of walking on all fours, wearing a ragged beggar's costume and a goat's beard. He conceals a bag beneath his clothes with the opening hidden under the goat's beard, so that those present believe he has eaten whatever food they give him. He enters the hall in this disguise and causes a commotion. Once he has drawn the attention of the Jarl, he speaks a *nid-verse* and thus exacts his revenge. The wearing of a costume and the delivery of a verse constitute the definition of a public performance. The scene has much in common with known traditions surrounding the *Julebukk*. Might these varied Yuletide processions and dramas be the remains of older pagan practices?

The popularity of these widespread traditions is evidenced by the many laws against them. A Danish national law of 1668 forbade the enactment of the *julebukk* and a Norwegian law (inclusive of Iceland) passed in 1687 stated that "all frivolous and contemptible games at Christmas" were strictly prohibited and all offenders to be seriously punished.<sup>43</sup> In Sweden, the tradition is first mentioned in 1555 by Olaus Magnus, and local ordinances against the *julebockslekn*, "Yulebuck games", appeared in Sweden from 1695 onward. According to a local custom in Setesdal, the animal slaughtered for the Christmas meal was known as the *julebjukke*;<sup>44</sup> it was to be fed the final sheaf of corn from the last harvest. Today a goat made of straw called the *Julebukk*, is a popular Christmas decoration in Scandinavia and a special kind of Christmas cake cut into the shape of a goat is also known by this name. While it is beyond doubt that these customs have early roots, they should be seen as a hodge-podge of earlier customs and beliefs associated with Yule, rather than the concrete remnants of any ancient tradition.<sup>45</sup> When considering the origins of these legends, one should note that Norwegian and Danish folktales mention a forest spirit called Hulla, Huldra, or Huldre. Dressed in a blue garment and a white veil, she visits the pastures of herdsman and joins in the dances of men. In the forests, Huldra is seen leading her flock, milkpail in hand. She is mistress of the *huldrefolk* or mountain spirits. In Iceland, these are called the *Huldufolk*, hidden people, akin to the *landvættir*.<sup>46</sup> Known as Gjøa, Góí, or Gjö in Norway, she may be the source of the Icelandic Gryla legend.<sup>47</sup> Gryla and her

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<sup>43</sup> Gunnell, *ibid*, p. 116.

<sup>44</sup> Gunnell, *ibid*, 121.

<sup>45</sup> Gunnell, *ibid*, pp.99, 112.

<sup>46</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, pp. 271-272.

<sup>47</sup> Lotz, *The Beauty and the Hag*, p. 79.

sons the Jólásveinar (nine or thirteen in number) have a reputation for stealing and eating naughty children in the days leading up to Christmas.



In German legend, Frau Holle is often regarded as a protector of childbearing women and small children. Young brides who bathed in *Frauhollenteich* (Frau Holle's pool) near Meissner in Hesse were supposed to become healthy and fertile wives.<sup>48</sup> In some districts, a newborn was said to have come from Frau Holle's house or her pool.<sup>49</sup> Birta or Bercht ("the bright one") appears a White Lady who will continue to rock the cradle once the nurse has fallen asleep. In southern Tyrol, a pond is named *Frau Holles Badeplatz*, and nearby a stone is found called *Frauhullistein*, where she is said to rest after helping young girls with their burdens.<sup>50</sup> Legend holds that Frau Holle lures children to her pond, where she will reward the good ones generously. On New Year's Eve, she brings presents in her wagon to children. In Lower Saxony, she is known as *fru Freke*, and she plays the roles assigned to *Frau Holle*.<sup>51</sup> In Germany, she is sometimes followed by a host of children. In one tale a young mother who had lost her only child recognizes him among Frau Holle's train. He pleads with her to stop mourning for him, informing her that he must work hard to gather her tears, catching each one in a cup. In the Saale valley, Perchta is accompanied by *heimchen*, a band of weeping children who water the field while she works underground with her plow.<sup>52</sup> These children loudly complain that they have no home. In Lower Styria, children who have not completed their Christmas chores disappear from the house. The train of weeping children connects Perchta to the Wild Hunt. Into this same furious host, according to popular belief, are adopted the souls of infants who have died unbaptized; not having been christened, they remain heathen and thus are left to heathen gods.<sup>53</sup> This host is typically called the *wütende her*, the furious host, but also *Wuotunges her*, Odin's

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<sup>48</sup> Waschnitius, p. 89.

<sup>49</sup> Davidson, *ibid.* p. 116, cp. Grimm.

<sup>50</sup> Waschnitius, p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 304

<sup>52</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* 275.

<sup>53</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 269.

host.<sup>54</sup> When a peasant in Mecklenburg hears the noise of it, he says *de Wode tiit*, “Odin drives”; in Pomerania on the Baltic and in Holstein, *Wode jaget*, “Odin hunts.” In Sweden, when hearing the noise of horses and carts at night, one says *Oden far forbi*, “Odin rides nearby.” Holda, like Odin, can ride the wind clothed in terror. Like him, she belongs to the Wild Hunt.<sup>55</sup> In Mecklenburg legends, she is Frau Gauden, once a lady of high rank with twenty-four daughters. She loved to hunt so much that one day, accompanied by her daughters in wild delight, she declared that hunting was better than heaven. Upon speaking these sinful words, her daughters’ dresses became coats of fur, their arms became legs; twenty-four bitches now barked around their mother’s car, four of them serving as horses. Away the wild train went, riding between heaven and hell forever. During the Twelve-nights, she directs her hunt toward human homes, riding through the streets on Christmas Day. Wherever she finds an open door, she sends in a black dog. He lies by the hearth, doing the inhabitants of the house no harm, but disturbing their sleep with his constant whining. He must not be pacified or driven away, lest sickness befalls the residents or fire destroys the house. Not until the next Twelve-nights does peace return to the household. Hence it is wise to keep the house-door locked during this time.<sup>56</sup> Crossroads are Frau Gode’s stumbling place. Whenever she finds herself within one, a part of her carriage falls into disrepair. Then she appears at a nearby house as a tall stately lady dressed in white asking for assistance in the night. She pays the helpful peasant with dog dung drawn from her pocket with the assurance that it is not as worthless as it seems. Incredulous but curious, the peasant takes some and to his amazement, at daybreak, his earnings became gold and he is sorry he had not taken more. When he returns to the spot, he can find no trace of her. Similarly, Frau Gode pays a peasant at Conow for his service with woodchips that turn into gold. Like Frau Holle, she loves children and gives them gifts so when children play “Frau Gauden” they sing: *Fru Gauden hett mi’n lammken geven, darmitt sall ik in freuden leven*,<sup>57</sup> which means “Frau Gode has given me a little lamb, so that I can live happily.”<sup>58</sup>

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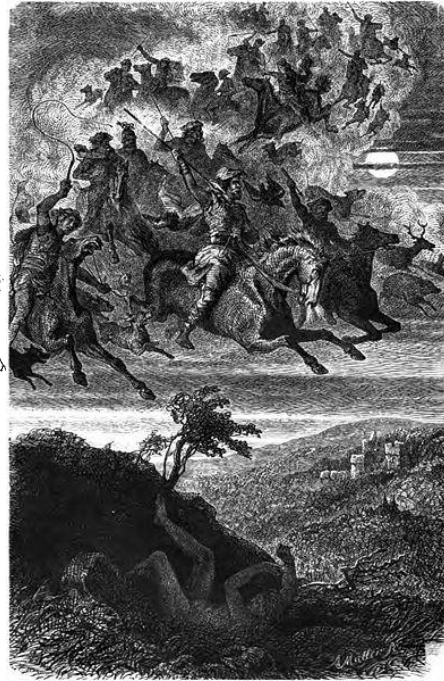
<sup>54</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 919.

<sup>55</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 268

<sup>56</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 926.

<sup>57</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 927.

<sup>58</sup> Translated by Heidi Graw



As mistress of the Wild Hunt, she is alternately known as *frau Gode*, *frau Gaue*, and *frau Woden*, demonstrating her connection to Odin. Because of this connection, Jacob Grimm came to believe that Frau Holla was a remembrance of Odin's wife. In the third volume of his *Deutsche Mythologie*, Grimm writes: "I am more and more convinced that Holda can be nothing but an epithet of the mild and 'gracious' Fricka; and Berhta, the shining, is identical with her too."<sup>59</sup> In Lower Saxony, the parts assigned to *frau Holle* are played by *fru Freke* corresponding to Anglo-Saxon *Fricg*, Old High German *Frikka*, *Frikkia*, Old Norse *Frigg*.<sup>60</sup> Johann Georg von Eckhart (1664-1730) in *De origine Germanorum* (p. 398) writes: "The common people of the Saxons honor Frau Freke, who bestows on them gifts, the same whom the nobles amongst the Saxons reckon as Holda."<sup>61</sup> In Westphalia, the name of an old convent, Freckenhorst, Frickenhorst points to a sacred *hurst* or grove of Frecka (feminine), or of Fricko (masculine) compare *Fræcinghyrst*. Adalbert Kuhn also found evidence of a *fru Freke* in the Uckermark, where she is called Fruike, which corresponds to *fru Harke* in the Mittelmark and *fru Gode* in the Prignitz.<sup>62</sup>

German harvest traditions also preserve obvious relics of heathenism. In Lower Saxony, it was customary to leave a clump of grain standing in the field "to Woden for his horse."<sup>63</sup> In Schonen and Blekingen, it was custom for reapers to leave a gift in the field "for Oden's horses." David Franck records a tradition among old people in Mecklenburg that no one weeds flax on *Wodenstag* (Wednesday) lest Woden's horse trample the seedlings, and from Christmas to Twelfth-day, they must not spin nor leave any flax on the distaff, for "Wode is galloping across."<sup>64</sup> In Schaumburg, when the harvesting is done, it is custom for the reapers to plant their scythes in the ground and beat the blade three times with their strops. Before taking a drink, they

<sup>59</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* pp. 947-948.

<sup>60</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 301.

<sup>61</sup> Translated by Carla O'Harris.

<sup>62</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 304.

<sup>63</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 155-156.

spill a bit of it onto the ground, wave their hats in the air and cry aloud “Wold, Wold, Wold!” Afterward they march home shouting and singing. If the ceremony is omitted, the next year will bring bad crops.<sup>65</sup> In the village of Steinhulde, after harvest the men gather at a nearby lake, light bonfires on a hill, wave their hats and shout “Wauden! Wauden!” In other Low German districts, this office is turned over to a woman.<sup>66</sup> When mowing rye, the villagers let some stalks stand, tie flowers among them, and when finished with their work gather around them and shout three times: “Fru Gaue, you keep some fodder, this year on the wagon.” In Prignitz, they call her *fru Gode* and leave a bunch of grain standing in each field which they call “Fru Gode’s portion.”<sup>67</sup> In the district of Hameln, it was custom, if a reaper while binding sheaves passed over one, to jeer and call out: “Is that for *fru Gauen*?!”<sup>68</sup>

The name Gauen connects this legendary figure directly to Odin. In Old Norse, the fourth day of the week is known as *Oðinsdagr*, Odin’s day. In Swedish and Danish, it is *Onsdag*; in North Frisian, *Winsdei*; in Middle Dutch, *Woensdach*; in Anglo-Saxon, *Wodenes dæg*, but in Westphalia, they call it *Godenstag*, *Gonstag*, *Gaunstag*, *Gunstag*, and in documents from the Lower Rhine, *Gudestag* and *Gudenstag*. Similarly, in the *History of the Lombards*, the first literary appearance of Odin and his wife, Odin is known as *Godan*. Grimm observes that a dialect which says *fauer* instead of *foer*, *foder* will equally have *Gaue* for *Gode*, *Guode*.<sup>69</sup> Thus, in *Frau Gauen* or *Gauden*, German farmers seem to have preserved the memory of a *Mrs. Odin* at work beside her husband in the fields long after the coming of Christianity.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. pp. 156-157.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 252.

<sup>67</sup> *Vergodendeelsstruss*. Grimm, *ibid.* p. 253

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. pp. 252-253.

<sup>69</sup> Grimm, *ibid.* p. 253.