



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

by William P. Reaves © 2010

### Hlin

"Ever since the pioneering work of Eugen Mogk in the 1920s and 30s, Old Norse scholarship has been forced to consider the possibility that some of the myths related in the *Prose Edda* were devised by Snorri himself. The notion that the master of Reykjaholt may have more or less continuously created and elaborated the stories of Old Norse paganism no longer shocks us, but we do not really believe it either." —Roberta Frank, University of Toronto, 1981.

Thor is the son of Odin and Earth. As mentioned above, this is amply confirmed by poetic examples where Thor is known as “the son of Odin” (*Völuspá* 55) and more often as “Earth’s son.” The examples we have expand our knowledge of Jörd, providing us additional epithets by which she is known.

*Jarðar sunr*, “Jörd’s son”, *Haustlög* 14  
*Jarðar burr*, “Jörd’s son”, *Þrymskvida* 1, *Lokasenna* 58.  
*Hlóðynar mögr*, Hlodyn’s son, *Völuspá* 56  
*Fjörgynjar burr*, Fjörgynn’s son, *Völuspá* 56.  
*Grundar svein*, Ground’s son, *Haustlög* 17.

These epithets refer to the physical earth and the personal earth-goddess at the same time. They are indistinguishable. In *Hárbarðsljóð* 56, Thor is told to meet his mother Fjörgyn in Verland, the “land of men.” The phrase “Fjörgyn’s eel” (*ál fjörgynr*) is a kenning for snake, while *á fjörgynju* simply means “on earth.” The name Hlódyn first appears around 950 AD in a verse by Völu-Steinn (*Skj I B*, 93), where the poet contrasts the dark earth with the green dress of Hlódyn, when recounting the funeral of his son.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the phrase *myrk-Hlóðynjar markar*, the “dark woods of Hlóðyn” in Einarr

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<sup>1</sup> McKinnell, *ibid*, p. 153-54.

skálaglamm's *Vellekla*<sup>2</sup> likens the forest to the dark hair of a woman. In many Indo-European traditions, earth is characterized as 'dark' or 'black'<sup>3</sup> and plants are a common alloform of hair,<sup>4</sup> demonstrating the great age of these concepts.

Scholars recognize the names Fjörgynn, Hlödýn, and Grund as synonyms of Jörd. In fact, all of the Old Norse divinities have alternate names. In the *Younger Edda*, Snorri Sturluson lists alternate names of Odin, Thor, and Freyja, among others. In *Gylfaginning* 3, Snorri says that Odin is known as All-father, Herran, Herjan, Hnikar, Hnikud, Fjöltnir, Oski, Omi, Biflidi, Biflindi, Svidar, Svidrir, Vidrir, Jalg and Jalk. In *Skáldskaparmál* 75, he calls Thor Atli, Asabragr, Ennilang, Eindridi, Bjorn, Hlorridi, Hardveur, Vingthor, Sonnung, Veud and Rym. In *Gylfaginning* 35, Snorri tells us that Freyja is known as Horn, Thrungva, Sýr, Skjalf, Gefn and Mardoll.<sup>5</sup> In addition to those listed by Snorri, more names can be discovered by turning to poetic sources. Numerous epithets of Odin are listed in *Grimnismál* 46-54, and in almost every mythological poem of the *Elder Edda* that mentions Odin we find examples. In the prose introduction to *Rigsthula*, we learn that Heimdall is known as Rig. In *Völuspá*, Loki is called Hveðrung. Oftentimes a god is called by different names in the course of a single poem. In *Hymiskviða*, Thor is known as Hlorridi, Veurr, as well as Thor. In *Thrymskviða*, he is called Vingthor and Hlorridi. Sometimes the meaning is not as obvious. For example, in a verse preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* 58, Frey is called "Beli's bane" and said to ride the horse Bloody-hoof.<sup>6</sup> In an adjacent verse, the same horse bears the mighty Atridi. Thus, Atridi is probably a byname of Frey.

In *Skáldskaparmál* 70, Snorri informs us that Earth too had many names. He cites poetic passages in support of each of the following bynames: *Jörð*, *Fold*, *Grund*, *Land*, *Fief*, *Hauðr*; *Lauð*; *Hlödýn*, *Frón* and *Fjörgyn*. By turning to poetic passages, we may add one more: *Hlín*. In verse 13 of *Hávarðar saga ísfirðings*, lines 5-6 read:

*þann vissak mér manna  
mest alls á Hlín fallinn*

"No man fell upon Hlin to a greater advantage for me, than this man."

Here Hlin is used as a byname of Jörd. "To fall upon Hlin" means to "fall down," "to die." Thus Hlin is a poetic synonym for Jörd. The name means "protector" from *hleina*, "to have peace and security"<sup>7</sup> and may be related to the word *hlein* meaning "a rock projecting like a pier into the sea" as well as a perpendicular loom used for weaving.<sup>8</sup>

In poetic sources, the name Hlin frequently occurs in kennings for women, indicating her divine status. The name of any goddess can be used as the base of a

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<sup>2</sup> *Heimskringla, Ólafs Saga Tryggvasonar* 26

<sup>3</sup> West, *ibid*, p. 179-80.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Lincoln, as well as J.P. Mallory and D.Q. Adams (*Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, s.v. grass) make this point.

<sup>5</sup> Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 156-7.

<sup>6</sup> Compare *Völuspá* 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ursula Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, Volume II, p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1957).

kenning for woman. As such a base, Hlin was a favorite. In *Gylfaginning* 35, Snorri lists Hlin as a minor goddess —the twelfth Asynje — appointed to watch over those whom Frigg desires to protect from harm. In fact, Snorri portrays Hlin, Jörd and Frigg as distinct goddesses. He lists them all twice as Asynjes: once in *Gylfaginning* 35-36 and again in the *þulur* where all three names appear in a list of the Asynjur. Despite this, Hlin’s status as an independent goddess is not supported by the older poetry, which is Snorri’s acknowledged source. As seen above, Hlin is used as a byname of Jörd in *Hávarðar saga ísfirðings* 13, while in *Völuspá* 53, Hlin is used a byname of Frigg. The verse reads:

*Þá kømr Hlínar  
harmr annarr fram,  
er Óðinn ferr  
við úlf vega,  
en bani Belja  
bjartr at Surti,  
þá mun Friggjar  
falla angan.*

“Then Hlin’s second grief comes to pass, when Odin goes to fight the Wolf and Beli’s bright bane (Frey) against Surt. Then Frigg’s *angan* shall fall.”

The kenning *Friggjar angan* is almost universally interpreted to mean Odin, Frigg’s husband.<sup>9</sup> The word *angan*, usually translated as “joy” or “delight,” is used both here and in *Völuspá* 22, where it is commonly thought to be a figurative use of its literal sense “sweet scent,” “perfume.”<sup>10</sup> According to the verse cited, Hlin’s “second grief” occurs when Odin goes to fight the wolf and Frey meets Surt; then “Frigg’s sweet scent (*angan*) shall fall.” The use of the name Hlin, which means protector, may be ironic here since Frigg is helpless to protect those she loves. Snorri’s identification of Hlin as an independent goddess while quoting this verse from *Völuspá* has caused some confusion among scholars. Under “Hlin”, Anthony Faulkes in the index to the Everyman edition of his translation of *Snorri’s Edda* writes: “...perhaps another name for Frigg; her first grief would have been the death of Baldr.” Rudolf Simek states: “Presumably, Hlin is really another name for Frigg and Snorri misunderstood her to be a goddess in her own right in his reading of the *Völuspá* stanza.”<sup>11</sup> Most translators accept the identification of Hlin and Frigg, and some go so far as to replace the name Hlin with Frigg’s in this verse. In her 1997 translation of the *Poetic Edda*, Carolyne Larrington replaces Hlin with Frigg and notes that Frigg’s second grief was the death of her husband Odin; her first being the death of her son Baldur. This is the most common interpretation of the verse.

At this point, the only thing that prevents us from concluding that Frigg, Jörd, and Hlin are alternate names of a single individual is Snorri’s treatment of them as three distinct personalities. An attempt to explain this apparent contradiction by suggesting that the name of one of Odin’s wives can be substituted for the name of any other, since in

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<sup>9</sup> Yngona Desmond offers a refreshing new perspective on this verse in her book *Völuspá— seiðr as mynd consciousness* (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Dronke, *ibid*, p. 133; see also the Cleasby/Vigfusson Old Icelandic Dictionary, s.v. *angan*.

<sup>11</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 153, s.v. Hlín.

poetic kennings the name of any goddess can be used as the base for a woman-kenning, is patently absurd! It would be equivalent to saying that the name of any one of Odin's sons could be substituted for the name of any other; that Thor could be used in place of Baldur and visa versa. This ill-considered supposition finds no support in the extant poetic sources. Instead, we find that Frigg and Jörd are both referred to as Odin's wife, and that the byname Hlin (as well as the poetically unattested expression "Gunnlod's rival,") can be used to designate either. It should seem obvious that the heathen poets who composed these poems knew Jörd as an alternate name of Odin's wife Frigg— in other words, that Odin's wife Frigg represents the Earth in the Germanic tradition. Therefore, with this tentative conclusion in mind, let's look at what the sources have to say of her.