



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

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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.<sup>1</sup> It is 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 dependant upon her for its existence. Karen Armstrong, in *A Short History of Myth* describes it this way:

“In early Neolithic mythology, the harvest was seen as the fruit of a heirogamy, a sacred marriage: the soil was female, the seeds divine semen; and rain was the sexual congress of heaven and earth.” (p. 43)

The sky is then imagined as a husband and father, whose fluid is required to fertilize the earth and bring forth new life. The agricultural symbolism is often 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, usually 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,”<sup>2</sup> As Mircea Eliade has shown, versions of this myth are prominent in Oceania from Indonesia to Micronesia, as well as in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy*, (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 13

<sup>2</sup> ‘*The Courtship of Dumuzi and Inanna*,’ *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Cramer, 1983, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, tr. Willard Trask (New York, 1959), pp. 147- 151, and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (New York, 1958), pp. 239 - 262.

detected similar patterns in Near Eastern and Old European mythologies,<sup>4</sup> demonstrating that this concept played a vital role in the indigenous religions of many societies across the globe.

From this observation, another parallel theory arose positing a mother figure as the basis of all world religions. In 1955, developmental psychologist Erich Neumann, influenced by the work of psychologist Carl Jung, proposed the concept of a universal Great Mother Goddess, which reigned as the dominant religious force before the concept of a supreme male deity developed.<sup>5</sup> This was advanced as a general theory of religion, and has been widely accepted in theory. Some prominent scholars argue that many symbols in early art were associated with her cult.<sup>6</sup> The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who assembled a wealth of evidence from early figurines and decorative patterns in support of this theory, outlines 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.”<sup>7</sup>

In its most mature form, the theory holds that the Great Mother Goddess ruled over a balanced matristic 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 neighbors.<sup>8</sup> 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, commonly linked with the spread of agriculture and the rise of civilization.

Evidence from many cultures around the world has been brought to bear in support of this theory, and all too often, continuity has been taken for granted without paying sufficient attention to the background and context of the material.<sup>9</sup> Thus we may have good reason to doubt the validity of this universal model of human religion. As inviting and inclusive as this theory may seem, Lotte Motz has shown that the worship of a Great Mother Goddess was not a universal phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> This fact, however, does not preclude the existence of such figures in individual cultures. Among scholars, there is little doubt that a goddess representing the Earth played an important role in the Indo-European religious tradition.<sup>11</sup> Among the Indo-Europeans, the Earth-goddess is widely celebrated with the title of ‘mother.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Such as Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis : Ritual Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York, 1961), pp. 62 – 64; and Sir James George Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (MacMillan & Co, 1919-1925); Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: Myths and Cult Images*, (Thames & Hudson, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Erich Neumann, “The Great Mother: an Analysis of the Archetype” as assessed by Hilda Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, (Routledge, 1997), p. 2

<sup>6</sup> Davidson, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *The Civilization of the Goddess*, (Harper Collins, 1991), p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> From an interview with Gimbutas at: <http://www.levity.com/mavericks/gimbut.htm> (Last viewed 7/27/2007).

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, *ibid.*, p. 4-12. Examples of this can be found throughout Karen Armstrong’s *A Short History of Myth*, which speaks more to the development of human religion in terms of general psychology more so than the development of any specific religion, until she reaches the historical era.

<sup>10</sup> As demonstrated by Lotte Motz in *The Faces of the Goddess*, (Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*, JP Mallory and DQ Adams, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 432: “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.’”

<sup>12</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 175. West gives examples from across the Indo-European diaspora.

As we shall see, she 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, Old Saxon, Old Low Franconian, and Old Frisian, the forebears of modern Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian, as well as the English, German, Low German (or *Plattdeutsch*), Dutch, and Frisian languages.<sup>13</sup> There, Earth is frequently described as the wife and mother of powerful sky gods (i.e. “Odin’s wife” and “Thor’s mother”), particularly in the Old Icelandic documents, which provide the best record of the ancient pre-Christian faith of that region. In Old Norse studies today, some scholars acknowledge the existence of a powerful Great Mother figure, proving that it is possible to identify a Mother Goddess in the Germanic religion.<sup>14</sup> John McKinnell in *Meeting the Other in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, (DS Brewer, 2005), p. 204, writes: “Lotte Motz argues that *Svipdagsmál* is a ritual induction of the young hero into a mother-goddess cult,” based on a 1975 article, in which Lotte Motz compares the goddess Menglad of that poem with “the mother goddess of many names (Ishtar, Demeter, Ninkhursag),” represented by the “great earth goddesses of ancient civilizations, mothers of life and death, subject to no male master.”

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<sup>13</sup> *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), see Chapter 10: Language, by Michael Barnes, pp.173-189, adding 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.”

<sup>14</sup> “The King and the Goddess: An Interpretation of the *Svipdagsmál*,” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, v 90, p. 133-150.