Odin's Wife:
Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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Nerthus

> "Tacitus' much-quoted account in *Germania* ch. 40 of the ceremonies related to the goddess Nerthus in the area around Schleswig-Holstein or Jylland is of particular interest here for several reasons. First of all, it suggests that the images of the Bronze Age petroglyphs depicting the *hieros gamos* and processions related to a fertility deity had parallels in southern Scandinavia as late as AD 100, when Tacitus wrote his account. Secondly, it provides the first reliable evidence that the ceremonies were now associated with a *named* goddess, who must therefore have had her own mythology and background. This in turn implies that enacted rituals to do with the goddess probably had a mythological parallel."
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> —Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, (DS Brewer, 1995), pp.53.

In literature, *Terra Mater* (Mother Earth) first appears as a distinct figure of the old heathen religion in the *Germania.* Despite intense scholarly debate over the political motivations of its author, *Germania*, written by the Roman historian Tacitus around 98 AD, was probably intended as an accurate account of the customs and conditions of the Germanic tribes who posed a threat on the northern border of the Roman Empire for several hundred years. While his moral observations of the Germanic tribes in contrast to the Roman way of life have led some scholars to purpose that this was his chief aim in writing it, this is not sufficient as a general interpretation of the text.[1] Not only does Tacitus criticize the Germanic way of life almost as often as he praises it, but much of the material has nothing to do with moral issues and cannot be explained simply as filler. J.B. Rives remarks that "To use the *Germania* as a historical source, then, requires careful evaluation and a willingness to acknowledge uncertainty. Yet it remains for all that a tremendously important source."[2] In commenting on Tacitus' claim that the only type of historical tradition among the Germans was "ancient lays" (*carmina antiqua*), he observes:

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[1] J.B. Rives, Tacitus *Germania*, (Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 51.
[2] Rives, ibid, p. 66.

> "That the early Germanic people had a rich tradition of oral poetry is suggested by the remains of early English, German, and Norse literature. Although very little of the extant material antedates the eighth century AD, it contains clear indications of earlier origins. First of all these traditions employ the same basic form: a line split into two halves by a strong caesura and linked by alliteration, each half-line normally having two primary stresses and a variable number of weaker stresses. The common tradition suggests that this form was established before there was much cleavage between the Scandinavian and continental Germanic cultures. Moreover, alliterative runic inscriptions date back to the fourth century AD (Lehmann, 1968). Secondly, several texts refer to historical figures of the sixth, fifth, and even fourth centuries AD. Attila for instance, appears in one of the lays of the *Poetic Edda*, the *Atlaqviða*, and is also mentioned in the English poems Widsith and Waldere; Widsith is also said to have visited Eormanric, a Gothic king of the fourth century. We can thus trace the tradition of early Germanic poetry, in both form and content, as far back as the fourth century AD, and there is no reason to doubt that it also existed in the time of Tacitus, especially if we compare the strong tradition of oral poetry among other Indo-European speakers."[3]

The *Germania* is divided into two halves. The first part discusses the common customs of the Germans as a whole. The second part relates specific information about individual Germanic tribes leading the reader on, so to speak, a tour of Germania. Some of this information relates to the northernmost Germanic tribes whose religion probably had much in common with that of the peoples from which the various Scandinavian nation-states emerged.[4] In chapter 40 of this all too brief work, Tacitus provides the first detailed account of a heathen ritual recorded in the Germanic territories. Serious scholars scarcely neglect it when discussing Germanic pagan beliefs and practices.[5]

Tacitus begins his account by telling of the *Langobardi* (Lombards), a tribe distinguished by their boldness in battle, who despite their small number, retained their independence in the midst of mighty neighbors made up of seven tribes, including the *Anglii*, the ancestors of the English Angles. Tacitus writes:

> "The Langobardi are distinguished by being few in number. Surrounded by many mighty peoples they have protected themselves not by submissiveness, but by battle and boldness. Next to them come the Reudigni, Aviones, Anglii, Varini, Eudoses, Suarines and Huitones protected by rivers and forests. There is nothing especially noteworthy about these states individually, but they are distinguished by a common worship of Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth, and believe she intervenes in human affairs and rides through their peoples. There is a sacred grove on an island of the Ocean, in which there is a consecrated chariot draped with a cloth, which the priest alone may touch. He perceives the presence of the goddess in the innermost shrine and with great reverence escorts her in her chariot, which is drawn by female cattle. There are days of rejoicing then and the countryside celebrates the festival, wherever she deigns to visit and to accept hospitality. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms. All objects of iron are locked away then and only then do they exercise peace and quiet, only then do they prize them, until the goddess has had her fill of society, and the priest brings her back to the temple. Afterwards the chariot, the cloth, and if one may believe it, the deity herself are washed in a hidden lake. The slaves who perform this office are immediately afterwards swallowed up in the same lake. Hence arises dread of the mysterious, and piety, which keeps them ignorant of what only those who are about to perish may see."[6]

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[3] Rives, ibid, p. 109.
[4] Ibid., McTurk (2005). Chapter 17: *Pagan Myth and Religion*, by Peter Orton, p. 303.
[5] Ibid., McTurk (2005), p. 303.
[6] A.R. Birley, translator; Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 58.

While some scholars have disputed various aspects of the Nerthus cult, from her very name to her status as a genuine Germanic earth goddess, none of these arguments has proven particularly effective in light of a comprehensive and careful examination of the evidence.

Most often doubted is the name Nerthus itself. Tacitus writes, *Nerthum, id est Terram matrem*, "Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth." Nerthus is only one of three divine names of ethnic origin in *Germania*, demonstrating that Tacitus probably had a Germanic source for it. Some scholars have disputed the certainty of this reading because of variant forms of the name found in the manuscripts, all of which date from the 15th century or later. These variant readings are: *Nerthum, Nertum, Neithum, Nehertum, Necthum, Herthum*, and *Verthum.*[7] Jacob Grimm himself addressed this point as early as 1835. Rather than any nationalistic desire to connect German folklore to Old Norse mythology, as some have suggested, Grimm, (the authority behind Grimm's Law)[8] relied on his skills as a linguist, clearly stating that "the manuscripts collated have this reading." Nor was this his preference: "I should prefer *Nertus* to *Nerthus*, because no other German words in Tacitus have TH, except Gothini and Vuithones." He rejects the reading Herthus, "though the aspirate in *herda* might seem to plead for it, the termination *–us* is against it."[9] Thus, the assertion by Lotte Motz that Grimm selected the name "*because* it coincides phonetically with Njorðr" is without foundation.[10]

Modern scholars, knowledgeable of linguistics, support the reading *Nerthum*. John McKinnell, compelled to respond to the growing chorus of late 20th century critics, explains the correctness of this reading:

> "The usually accepted stemma has three families, and readings shared by the best manuscripts of any two of them are thought likely to be correct. The best X group manuscripts (Vatican, Cod. Vat. 1862, Leiden UL XVIII Periz.Q.21) read *Neithum;* the best y manuscripts (Cod. Vat. 1518, Codex Neapolitanus) have *Nerthum*, and the best Z manuscript (Iesi, *Æ*sinas Lat. 8) reads *Nertum.* The sound /th/ did not exist in classical Latin, though the spelling is found in words derived from Greek or the Germanic languages (such as *thesaurus* 'treasure', or the name *Theodoricus*). Tacitus would therefore be unlikely to introduce the spelling *th* gratuitously. In the fifteenth century, the Italian scribes who produced most of the earliest surviving manuscripts (including the Iesi manuscript) would have a natural tendency to replace *th* with *t*, as was consistently done in their native language (see Italian *tesoro, Teodorico),* but would be very unlikely to do the reverse. *Nerthum* is therefore more probably correct than *Nertum.* If both Y and Z should read *Nerthum,* that reading must be preferred. A different stemma, proposed by Robinson, has only two groups, and the best manuscripts in both read *Nerthum.* Whichever stemma is correct, *Nerthum* therefore seems the likeliest reading, although it could represent either a grammatically masculine *Nerthus* or a grammatically neuter *Nerthum.*"[11]

That the name Nerthus is grammatically masculine in form has lead some critics, such as Klaus von See,[12] to conclude that Tacitus had no genuine information about the cult of Nerthus other than this name, and therefore based his account of the Germanic 'god' on the Roman cult

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[7] John McKinnell, ibid, p. 50.

[8] Also known as the *First Germanic Sound Shift*. Discovered by Friedrich von Schlegel in 1806 and Rasmus Christian Rask in 1818, and later elaborated in 1822 by Jacob Grimm, Grimm's Law was the first non-trivial systematic sound change to be discovered in linguistics; its formulation was a turning point in the development of linguistics, enabling the introduction of a rigorous methodology to historical linguistic research. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimm%27s_law (last viewed 7/29/2007).

[9] Grimm, ibid, p. 251.

[10] Lotte Motz, *The King, The Champion and the Sorcerer* (Fassbaender, 1996), pg. 116. Emphasis by Motz..

[11] McKinnell, ibid. p. 51.

[12] 'Der Germane als Barbar', *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik*, 13, (1981): pp.42-72.

of *Magna Mater* (the Great Mother), a cult in which Tacitus was himself entitled to participate.[13] Therefore, the most frequent objections to the authenticity of the Nerthus cult are based upon superficial comparisons to its Roman reflection, almost always ignoring their sharp contrasts.[14] Besides the superficial similarity of the designations *Terra Mater* and *Magna Mater*, or more properly *magna deum mater,* "great mother of the gods,"[15] scholars prone to compare the two point out the fact that both cults included a public procession which terminated with the ritual washing of the idol in a lake. The differences between these cults, however, are not insignificant, and thus there is little reason to suspect that Tacitus drew on his knowledge of the Roman cult in his description of the Germanic Mother Earth. Tacitus describes the goddess in question as *Terra Mater*, not *Magna Mater*. The Romans knew a *Tellus* or *Terra Mater,* who had a different ceremony than the one attributed to Nerthus; cattle were sacrificed to her on the 14th of April.[16] The worship of Cybele, *the great mother of the gods*, spread from its chief sanctuary, Pessinus in Phrygia, to Greece by the early fourth century and then on to Egypt and Italy. Heeding the counsel of the Sibylline oracle concerning the threat of foreign invaders, the Roman senate brought her worship to Rome in 204 BC as the first officially sanctioned Eastern cult. Lucretius provides one of the best descriptions of her festival, [17] considered decadent even by Roman standards, as it was celebrated around the time of Julius Caesar.[18] In one telling of her story, the goddess was born a hermaphrodite and was castrated at birth, leaving her female. Attis, her consort, was the child of a nymph, impregnated by the goddess' discarded member. Cybele fell in love with Attis, but grew jealous of him after he was unfaithful to her and so drove him insane. He died from blood-loss after castrating himself. This myth was reenacted during the festival. In her train, men, known as Galli, castrated themselves in devotion to her, following the example of Attis. Since this practice was outlawed among the Romans, the Galli were all recruited from outside of Rome. Once a year, decked out in their exotic feminine garments, long hair and amulets, these self-mutilated eunuchs were allowed to parade a statue of the goddess, seated in a chariot pulled by wild lions, through the streets accompanied by the clatter of cymbals and the sounds of tambourines. Gathered spectators threw flower petals and coins before them. Bulls were ritually slaughtered at her increasingly elaborate feasts.[19] During the rest of the year, the Senate confined the Galli to an enclosed sanctuary and declared that no citizen had the right to enter the annexes occupied by them or take part in their frenzied orgies. In detail, this cult is quite unlike the peaceful public procession of Nerthus, in which all iron objects were locked away.[20] Instead of wild lions, her car was drawn by domestic cattle.[21] A single priest, rather than a motley crew, attended her and only he was allowed to touch her sacred vehicle.

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[13] Alternately, Richard North has suggested that Nerthus was originally a male deity in the company of the female Terra Mater, and that Tacitus misunderstood his source. *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, ch. 2 (Cambridge Press, 1997).

[14] Cp. McKinnell, p. 51 ff.; It was Jacob Grimm who first brought these connections to light, also noting an Indian analog in Bhavani, wife of Shiva. His quoting the sources at length made it wholly unnecessary for him to highlight their obvious differences (Grimm, Ibid, p. 255).

[15] Grimm, ibid. p. 254 citing Lucretius 2, 597.

[16] North, ibid. p. 21.

[17] *De Rerum Natura*, 2.600 ff.

[18] Cp. Cattulus, Poem 63.

[19] Source: http://abacus.bates.edu/~mimber/Rciv/Megalesiaci.htm (last viewed 7/29/2007).

[20] Cp. the Aestii, ch. 45, who preferred clubs over iron weapons.

[21] In the *Rigveda*, which contains a proliferation of Bovine imagery, the cow is associated with the earth, while the bull represents the sky. In Greek mythology, Zeus sometimes takes the form of a bull, and his partner that of a cow.

Although some scholars have pointed out possible foreign models for Tacitus' account of the Nerthus cult, it is more probable that he based his account on native Scandinavian tradition.[22] A divinity in a wagon is well-known in Germanic lore, thus there is little need to speculate that Tacitus borrowed the idea from Roman sources. According to the *Prose Edda*, Thor drives a wagon drawn by goats, Frey arrives at Baldur's funeral in a cart led by a boar, and Freyja rides in a car pulled by cats. Njörd too is known as 'god of wagons' in a skaldic verse cited in the primary manuscript of Snorri's *Edda*; where other manuscripts have *Vana guð* ('god of the Vanir'), *Codex Regius* has *vagna guð* ('god of the wagon').[23] The Big Dipper (Ursa Major) was commonly known as the Wain, or wagon. In skaldic poetry, Odin is known as *runni vagna*, "mover of wagons"; *vinr vagna*, "friend of wagons"; *vári vagna* "protector of wagons"; and *valdr vagnbrautar*, "ruler of the wagon-road". The sky itself, home of the gods, is known as "the land of wagons (*land vagna*)," indicating that the constellations were imagined as the gods circling the heavens in their cars.[24]

Other Germanic literary sources also support the procession of a fertility idol in a wagon through the northern European countryside. In the latter half of the fourth century, Sozomenos, writing of the many dangers that beset Uphilas among the heathen Goths speaks of Anthanaric placing a statue in a "covered carriage" and ordering it conveyed to the homes of those suspected of practicing Christianity. If they refused to fall down and sacrifice (evidently to the deity represented by the statue), their homes were set ablaze.[25] In the 6th century, Gregory of Tours describes the procession of the goddess named Berecynthia (probably a Roman interpretation of a local goddess), as she was drawn through fields and vineyards "according to the wretched custom of the pagans" to bring them prosperity, while the people sang and danced before her.[26] During her festival at Augustodunum (near Lyon), Simplicius, the bishop of Autun, saw the peasants conveying her white-veiled statue around the newly-sown fields and prayed for its destruction. Straightaway, the statue fell from its cart and broke.[27] Einhard tells us how the Merovingian dynasty, once a year, used to run an 'old fashioned' cart pulled by bulls through the country.[28] The bulls that pulled the cart were considered special, like the kings they transported. Hence, the theft of those animals would impose a sanction two and a half times higher than that

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According to Homer, Zeus' wife Hera has the strange-epithet "cow-faced". In Hittite mythology, the storm-god is also represented as a bull. (West, ibid, p. 185).

[22] E. O. G. Turville-Petre, 'Fertility of Beast and Soil' in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Synposium,* ed. Edgar Polemé, (University of Texas Press, 1969) pp. 249-252.

[23] North, ibid. p. 24.

[24] *Skáldskaparmál* 31 *: Hvernig skal kenna himin*? *Svá at kalla …land sólar ok tungls ok himintungla, vagna ok veðra, "How shall the heaven be named*? It shall be named …land of sun, of moon, of planets, of wagons, of winds." Anthony Faulkes translates the word *vagna* as "constellations", see Faulkes, *Edda Snorri Sturluson*, (Everyman, reprinted 1997), p. 88.

Hermiae Sozomeni *Historia*, p. 1406; cited by Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, Stalleybrass tr. pp. 106-107 and North, ibid, p. 147.

[25] *Hermiae Sozomeni Historia*, p. 1406; cited by Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie,* Stalleybrass tr. pp. 106-107 and North, ibid, p. 147.

[26] *Liber in Gloria Confessorum* 77 cited in Hilda Ellis Davidson's *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (Routledge, 1993), p. 133, translated in North, ibid. p. 22.

[27] In support of this account, Pamela Berger of Boston College notes that "a majority of the hundreds of mother goddess statues uncovered in modern times in the areas that make up Gaul and Germania either have their head struck off or bear other evidence of purposeful disfigurement," *The Goddess Obscured* (Beacon Press, 1985), p. 37 citing Harmening *Superstitio*, pp. 43-48.

28 Einhardi Vita Caroli Magni, 1. In MGH, *Scriptores rerum Sangallensium*. *Annales, chronica et historiae aevi Saxonici*, Hannover 1829.

of the regular gelded ox. The metal head of a bull bearing a solar disk was recovered from the tomb of Meroveus' son, Childeric I, at Tournai in 1653.[29] This connection between the bull, a fertility god and the Merovingians is better understood by consideration of a myth preserved by the seventh century historian known as pseudo-Fredegar. Interpolating Gregory of Tours, he tells a story about the conception of Meroveus, after whom the dynasty is named. According to him, the Frankish king Chlodeo was taking a summer bath with his wife, when she was attacked by some sort of sea monster, which Fredegar calls a Quinotaur. It was unknown if Meroveus was conceived by the man, Chlodeo, or the beast, the Quinotaur. At its very foundation myth, the Merovingian dynasty was associated with a fertility cult involving cattle. Another parallel to Tacitus' account of Nerthus, as well as to the religious activities on ships featured in the Bronze Age petroglyphs, is found in the description of a protracted ship procession that traveled by land and water from Aachen to Loos in the year 1133, according to the *Gestorum Abbatum Trudonensium* (Book 12, Ch. 10-14).[30] Sometimes cited as another example of such a procession is the conveyance among his people of King Frotho III's body in a wagon for three years after his death as told in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Dancorum*, Book 5. Other relevant examples cited by scholars include the description of Thor's chariot at a temple in *Ólafs saga Tyrggvasonar*, the walking image of Thor kept on an island in the north of Norway as told in *Rögnvalds þáttr ok Rauðs,* and the account in *Hauks þáttr hábrókar* of a god known as Lytir, who traveled to a sacrifice in Uppsala in a special wagon that awaited his arrival for three nights.

Most often cited as the strongest piece of evidence confirming the details of the seasonal circuit made by Nerthus in *Germania* is *Gunnars þáttr helmings.*[31] This tale dating from the late 13th or early 14th century is a religious parody recounting the plight of a man named Gunnar who flees from Norway to Sweden in the first year of Olafr's reign (995 AD) taking refuge there with a priestess of Frey. He accompanies her as she travels among her people giving *arbót* ('help with the crops').[32] In this procession, Frey represented by a wooden idol and his wife, the priestess, ride in a horse-drawn wagon through the countryside, just as Nerthus rides in a covered wagon drawn by cattle, attended by a priest of the opposite sex. The time of the procession is marked with peace and feasting. Gunnarr bravely leads the horse through a blizzard, but when he requires rest and sits in the wagon, Frey attacks him. As they wrestle, Gunnar vows to return to King Olafr and the Christian faith should he survive. At once, "the devil" exits the wooden idol and takes flight allowing Gunnar to smash the statue to pieces. Impersonating Frey, Gunnar impregnates the priestess before returning to Norway and Christianity. When the pregnancy of the priestess is revealed, the Swedes take Frey to be the father, saying: *uar ok uedratta blid ok allir hlutir suo aruœnir at œingi madr munde slight*, "the weather looked balmy and everything gave such hope of a good season that no man could have done such a thing."[33] Here too, good harvests are attributed to the god. Intended to make light of the pagan past, this story instead confirms many of the details of the Nerthus cult as described by Tacitus: an idol is drawn through the countryside in a wagon, attended by a priest of the opposite sex; only the priest can sense the presence of the god and touch the idol; during the procession, peace reigns. At the very least, this tale provides evidence that people in the early fourteenth century accepted the idea that

[29] Gelling and Davidson, ibid, p. 163-164, which shows a sketch of the artifact, now lost.
[30] Almgren, *Hällristningar*, pp. 28-30, cp. Rudwin, *The Origin of the German Comedy Festival*, pp. 10-12.
[31] Preserved in the *Flateyjarbók*, this *þáttr* forms the second half of *Ogmundar þáttr dytts* in *Olafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*.
[32] "*Hún svarar:"Vel líkar mönnum til þín og þykir mér ráð að þú sért hér í vetur og farir á veislur með okkur Frey þá er hann skal gera mönnum árbót'",* cp. Frey's designation *árguð* in *Skáldskaparmál* 14.
[33] As cited by North, ibid, p. 24.

heathen religious processions conveying effigies of heathen idols through the countryside were still taking place during the reign of Olaf Tryggvasson.[34]

The wintertime procession of Frey's idol may be related to the *hieros gamos* of Frey and Gerd described in the Eddic poem *Skírnismál.* The phrases *myrkt er úti,* "it is dark outside" (st. 10) and *long er nótt*, "one night is long" (st. 42), hardly apply to the summer months in Scandinavia when the days are long and the night barely existent.[35] As Terry Gunnell demonstrates, a wide range of Yuletide pairing games and mock-marriage traditions are found all over Scandinavia.[36] These traditions flourished despite Church prohibitions in Scandinavia against the celebration of real marriages at any time during the Christmas season. Conversely, in Shetland, all marriages were to be celebrated during the three winter months. Such regulations may have had their roots in an association between marriage ceremonies and heathen winter festivals.[37] In Scandinavia, mock-marriages and bridal figures were associated with both the winter and the summer solstices.[38]

Nerthus is most often identified as one of the Vanir. It has long been recognized that the name *Nerthus* is an etymon of *Njörðr, a* Vanir god, and father of Frey and Freyja.[39] Grimm himself noted that the name Nerthus was identical to the later Old Norse name Njörðr, an "identity as obvious as that of Frey to Freyja."[40] According to John McKinnell (2005), the development would be "Nerthus > *Njarðuz (breaking) > *Njörðuz (u-mutation) > Njörðr (synscope)."[41] Much has been made of this apparent gender gap. Over the years, scholars have sometimes assumed that the deity always had been male or had changed gender reflecting the reduction in the status of women, between the times of Tacitus and Saxo.[42] These interpretations are unwarranted since a number of wooden idols recovered from the peat mosses of Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein suggest that the deity could be of either sex. Those from Foerlev Nymølle and Rebild skovhuse are female, while those from Broddenbjerg, Spangeholm and Rude Eskildstrup are male. The site at Aurkemper Mose, Braak, Holstein produced one of each gender, suggesting a cult in which a god and goddess were worshipped as siblings and spouses.[43] The difference of sex between Njörd and Nerthus is much less of a problem than some imagine, for among the gods associated with these idols, we find parallel names such as that of Njörd's children, Frey and Freyja, who were twins, and the earth goddess, Fjörgynr, and Frigg's father Fjörgynn, whose names are equivalent to one another and therefore sometimes confused by the translators.[44] Thus, it is not inconceivable that Njörd and Nerthus represent twin siblings.[45] This is all the more likely since in *Lokasenna* 36, Njörd is said to have fathered Frey with his own sister, who remains unnamed in the fragmentary accounts left for study.[46] Nerthus' temple *in*

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[34] Gunnell, ibid, p. 54.
[35] Gunnell, ibid, p. 57.
[36] See Gunnell, ibid, 133-135.
[37] Gunnell, ibid. p. 134-135.
[38] Gunnell, ibid, pp. 135-140.
[39] At least as far back as Jacob Grimm, see *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. 13.
[40] *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. 10.
[41] McKinnell, ibid, p. 50.
[42] McKinnell, ibid. p. 52, citing North pp. 1-25.
[43] McKinnell ibid. p. 55
[44] *Fjörgynn*, a masculine name, attested in *Lokasenna* 26 and *Gylfaginning* 9; *Fjörgynr*, a feminine name, attested in *Hárbarðsljóð* 56, *Völuspá* 56 and elsewhere. See John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, (ABC Clio, 2001), pp. 117-118.
[45] Orton, ibid. p. 304.
[46] *Við systur þinni gaztu slíkan mög ok er-a þó vánu verr* [*Eddukvæði* I, Guðni Jónsson, p. 154]

insula Oceani (on an island in the Ocean) also may point in this direction, since Njörd is a sea-god and *Oceanus* is a proper noun derived from Greek mythology.[47] Despite the age separating these sources, Richard North observes:

> "The formal relationship between two divine names, between *Nerthus* of the Anglii and *Njörðr* of the Norsemen, is evidence of a cultural continuity in this period sufficient to permit further comparison between Tacitus's *Germania* and pagan poems in the Old Norse-Icelandic vernacular. In these ways, Icelandic literature may be read uniquely, or in combination with Tacitus and later Latinate and even Hellenistic sources to interpret the literary traces of heathen gods in Old English literature."[48]

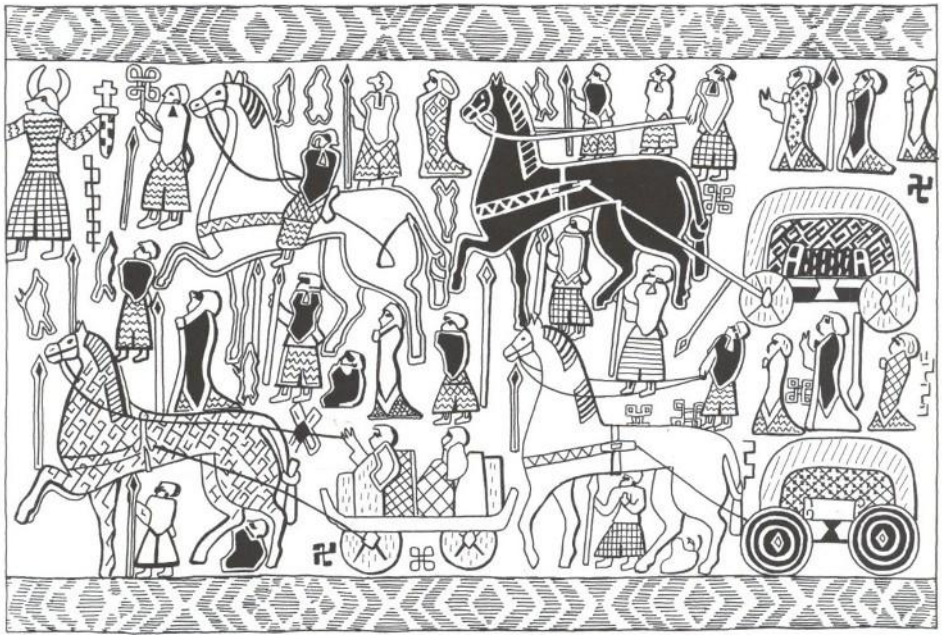
The Nerthus procession which ends with a sacrifice in a lake, can further be compared to finds of ceremonial wagons and idols found deposited in peat bogs. Two Iron Age ceremonial wagons, one with an alder wood stool that could have been used as a seat, from Dejbjerg in Jutland, Denmark (probably first century BC), and two more from Danish cremation graves conceivably may have been used for a procession like that of Nerthus; all of them have been deliberately sacrificed.[49] Both of the wagons from Dejeberg have numerous bronze fittings with typical La Tène ornamentation, which indicate Celtic manufacture in the first century BC. They are four-wheeled vehicles with a relatively low compartment, approximately 1.8 meters in length with a central pole of richly ornamented bronze extending another 1.8 meters in front. The rich ornamentation suggests they were probably for ceremonial use, while their circumstances indicate a ritual deposit. Found in a bog, both wagons had been carefully dismantled, and both were perhaps surrounded by an enclosure of stakes.[50] The elaborately carved wagon found on the Oseberg ship (c. 850 AD) appears to have been incapable of turning corners, and thus was likely limited to ceremonial use.

A tapestry buried with the Oseberg wagon, of which several fragments survive, offers further insight. The main fragment of the tapestry depicts what has been interpreted as a religious procession involving three wagons, one of which holds two figures. At least one of these figures

[47] North, ibid, p. 29. "Tacitus uses the word *Oceanus* rather than Latin *mare* to describe the sea."
[48] Richard North, ibid, p. 11.
[49] McKinnell, ibid. 52; Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (Routledge, 1993), p. 133.
[50] Rives, ibid, pp. 292-293.

appears to be a woman. The other two wagons are covered, and it has been plausibly argued that they hold holy objects of some kind. Terry Gunnell (ibid, p. 60) writes:

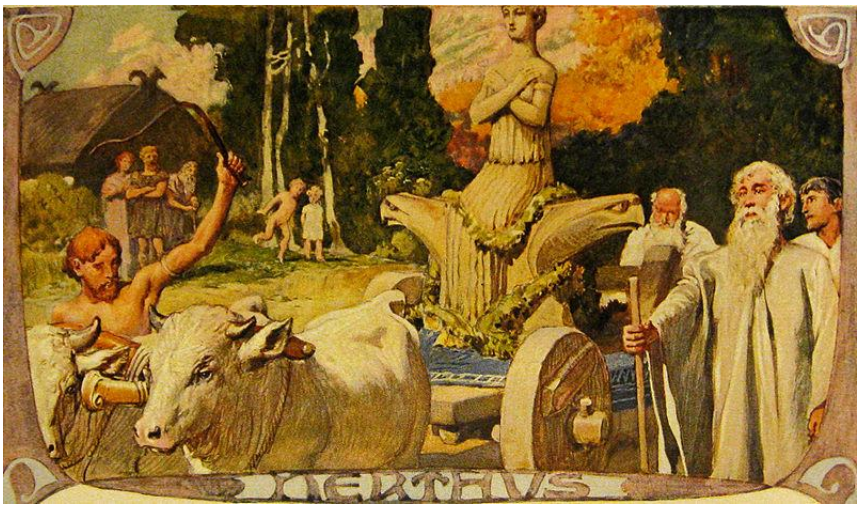
> "The images contained in the Oseberg tapestry are often extremely unclear and enigmatic, but nonetheless clear enough to suggest that what is being portrayed in the pictures should be viewed in a ritual context. This is evident not only from the wagon processions but also from the row of dancing female figures, (*footnote*: The fact that several magical swastika symbols appear between the dancers lends credence to the idea of the dance having religious connotations to do with fertility), and the line of celebrants who have a stance similar to that often depicted on the Bronze Age petroglyphs. Finally, and perhaps most telling, is the image of the sacrificial tree bedecked with a number of human corpses, thus supporting Adam of Bremen's later description of the sacrificial grove near the heathen temple at Uppsala."



One fragment of this tapestry contains an image of an armed man, clad in what appears to be an animal skin, approaching another figure wearing a helmet adorned with bull-horns and carrying a pair of crossed spears. The horned figure reappears in the procession fragments. Another fragment contains a group of boar-headed women bearing shields. Yet another depicts a female figure clad as a bird of prey standing in front of what has been interpreted as a temple. It is probable that some of what is depicted on the tapestry has a mythological context.[51] The posture, helmets and equipment of these figures all occur elsewhere in Germanic material from the Bronze Age petrogylphs (at the latest c.500 BC) forward, once again, pointing to the continuation of an almost homogeneous religious tradition with very ancient roots.[52] As we have seen, the religious procession was well-established in northern Europe. This practice may be

[51] Gunnell, ibid, 63. See also E.O.G. Turveille-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (Holt, Rinehart & Wilson, 1964), p. 57.
[52] Gunnell, ibid, p. 60.

seen as continuing into the Christian era when statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints were carried round to bless the fields.[53]



[53] Davidson,.ibid.