



Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

by William P. Reaves © 2010

Odin

Historically, Odin is the first recognizable Germanic god called by a Germanic name, which we can trace through to the late heathen era. The earliest record of Odin's name occurs in a runic inscription on a silver-gilt fibula discovered near Ausberg, Bavaria in 1843 known as the Nordendorf Fibula I. Dated to the mid 6th century, it reads "Logapōre Wodan Wigi-Þonar." While the meaning of the entire inscription is disputed, the name Wodan in the inscription "poses no problem."¹

Naturally, when foreign observers encountered the people of the North, they spoke of their gods in familiar terms. Classical historians, almost to a man, agreed that the people of northern Europe held the god "Mercury" in high esteem. Of the Scythians, Herodotus writes:

"The gods which they worship are but three, Mars, Bacchus, and Dian. Their kings, however, unlike the rest of the citizens, worship Mercury more than any other god, always swearing by his name, and declaring that they are themselves sprung from him."²

In his *Gallic War* (6, 17), Caesar says of the Celts: "Among the gods, they most worship Mercury,"³ and of the Germans, Tacitus in *Germania* 9 remarks: "Among the gods, Mercury is the one they principally worship."⁴

In the Germanic world, the Roman god Mercury has been identified with Odin since the earliest times. In the Anglo-Saxon transliteration of the Roman days of week, Mercury's day is identified with Odin's. The fourth day, *Diēs Mercurtius*, Mercury's Day, is rendered as Wednesday, Odin or Wotan's Day. The evidence suggests that Odin was well-known among the pre-Christian people of England. Uoden or Woden is listed as the ancestor of kings in

¹ John McKinnell and Rudolf Simek, *Runes, Magic, and Religion: A Sourcebook*, (Fassbaender, 2004), pp. 48-49.

² Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 5, ch. 7; Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, p. 390

³ Translated by H.J. Edwards, Harvard University Press, 1917.

⁴ Translated by A.R. Birley, Oxford University Press, 1999.

genealogies found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the entries for the years 547, 560, and 855. The early Anglo-Saxon Church probably tolerated Odin for political reasons, since, as among the Scythians, descent from him defined royal status.⁵ Before the end of the eighth century, Woden was acknowledged as the founder of all Anglian and Anglian-dominated tribes.⁶ After that time, royal genealogies were extended further back to include Frealaf, Geat, Sceldwas, —the father of Scyld— and eventually Noah. A number of place-names primarily in southern England, well outside of the jurisdiction of the Danelaw suggest an early Woden cult in the southern regions of pre-Viking England. These include Woddesgeat (Wiltshire), Wodnesbeorg (Wiltshire), Wodnesdene (Wiltshire), Wensley (Derbyshire), Wodnesfeld (Essex), and Woodnesborough (Kent). In the tenth century, Ælfric in his condemnation of pagan practices among the Anglo-Saxons in *De Falsis Diis*, ll. 133-135, characterizes the hated god *Mercurius* as *swiðe facenfull and swicol an dædum*, “full of crime and treacherous in his deeds,” and the *Exeter Book Maxims* unfavorably compare Woden to the Christian god: *Woden worhte weos, wuldor alwalda, / rume roderas* ‘Woden made idols, the Almighty [made] glory, the spacious heavens.’

Although the evidence is sparse, among the Anglo-Saxons, Odin seems to have shared at least some of the attributes he had in Icelandic mythology. In Bede’s account of the last days of seventh-century Anglian paganism, Coifi, the high-priest of Deira (c. 627), declared the old religion a waste of time, rode to his own shrine at Goodmanham and threw a spear at the altar of the gods. Henry Mayr-Harting has suggested that this act may be “a small but highly significant pointer to the cult of Woden and the knowledge of his mythology at the time.”⁷ In later Icelandic sources, Odin carries the spear Gungnir and casts it over his enemies as a sign of war. Woden also appears in 10th or 11th century healing charm preserved in the *Lacnunga* (*MS BL Harley 585*), which reads:

Wyrn com snican, toslat he man;
 ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
 sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah.
 þær geændade æppel and attor,
 þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan.

”A worm [snake] came crawling, he wounded nothing.
 Then Woden took nine glory-twigs,
 Smote the adder that it flew apart into nine [parts].
 There apple and poison brought it about,
 That she never would dwell in the house.”⁸

The charm personally addresses each of the nine herbs, naming their attributes and accomplishments. Each are cited as remedies against poisons, implying that Odin, the Hanged God himself, created them. However, due to the late date of the charms, Scandinavian influence cannot be ruled out.

⁵ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 72-97.

⁶ Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, (Cambridge, 1997), p. 112, citing a survey by Kenneth Sisam.

⁷ H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity* (Schocken, 1972), pp. 22-30.

⁸ Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England, Elf Charms in Context* (1996), p. 126.

Fille and finule, felamihtigu twa,
þa wyrte gesceop witig drihten,
halig on heofonum, þa he hongode;

"Chervil and Fennel, very mighty two
These herbs he created, the wise lord,
holy in heaven, when he hung"

We also find early evidence of Odin on the continent. In the 7th century, Jonas of Bobbio records an encounter St. Columban had with the Germanic tribe known as the Suebi, who were preparing a sacrifice to their god:

“Once as he [Columban] was going through this country, he discovered that the natives were going to make a heathen offering. They had a large cask that they called a *cupa*, and that held about twenty-six measures, filled with beer and set in their midst. On Columban's asking what they intended to do with it, they answered that they were making an offering to their God Wodan (whom others call Mercury). When he heard of this abomination, he breathed on the cask, and lo! it broke with a crash and fell in pieces so that all the beer ran out.”⁹

In an 8th century citation, a historian of the Lombardi writes “Wodan indeed, whom by adding a letter they called Godan, is he who among the Romans is called Mercury and worshipped by all peoples of Germany as a god.”¹⁰ This document, or more accurately, its anonymous authority, is also significant for introducing Odin’s wife *Frea*, whose Anglo-Saxon equivalent *Frigg* became the basis for our word Friday. Evidence for the worship of Odin is also found in the 9th century Saxon Baptismal vow (Vatican Codex pal. 577) which compelled the Saxons to renounce Wodan, Thunear, and Saxnot.¹¹ In the 10th century, we find a reference to Odin, Frigg, and Baldur in the German Second Merseburg Charm; and an 11th century reference to the gods Odin, Thor and Frizzo in the temple at Uppsala by the historian Adam of Bremen. By the 13th century, Odin appears fully developed as the head of the pantheon in the Eddas and sagas of Iceland, generally acknowledged to be composed of older material. This long chain of evidence, dating from the earliest appearances of the Germans in the historic record, leave little doubt that Odin remained a prominent feature of the Germanic pantheon as far back as the record allows us to know.

If we consider the continuity of Odin (Mercury) in the historic record and compare Odin’s attributes and characteristics to those of the proposed Indo-European Sky-father, there is little reason to doubt that Odin is the inheritor of the mantle of **Dyeus Pater*. Like the Greek Zeus, Odin is one of three brothers, who are the third generation from Chaos. Both survey the world from their heavenly throne, wield a casting weapon, carry on affairs, and are married to a goddess representing the earth. Even if their names are not identical, their attributes are. The name Odin (**Wodanz*) comes from a root meaning “wind, breath, spirit”, an appropriate

⁹ Source: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/columban.html> (last viewed 2/29/08)

¹⁰ William Dudley Foulke tr.

¹¹ *Ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and uuordum, Thunaer ende Uuöden ende Saxnote ende allum them unholdum the hira genötas sint* (“I renounce all the words and works of the devil, Thunear, Wöden and Saxnöt, and all those fiends that are their associates.”).

designation for a sky god. Thus, rather than assuming that Odin came late to the throne of the ancient Indo-European Sky-father, we might just as readily conclude that somewhere along the line one of the Sky-father's epithets came to stand in for his proper name—that **Dyeus Pater* became **Wodanz*—perhaps due to a taboo of naming the god directly.¹² Martin L. West explains:

“More than one factor contributed to the replacement of names. A god's primary name might be avoided for taboo reasons. It might be displaced by familiar epithets or titles, rather as the Christian deity is no longer known as Yahweh or Jehovah, but is mostly just called God, or alternatively the Almighty, the Heavenly Father, the Lord, and so forth. ...Gods' names are not invented arbitrarily, like those of aliens in science fiction. Originally they have a meaning, they express some concept, and sometimes this is still apparent or discoverable.”¹³

According to the conventions of comparative mythology, Odin should be considered the Germanic analog to the old Indo-European sky-god. Only Odin's name, not being a cognate of the reconstructed compound **Dyeus Pater*, has prevented scholars from reaching this conclusion. Once linguists identified **Dyeus Pater* as the proper name of the Indo-European Sky-father at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this honor has commonly been bestowed on Tyr, the one-handed god, as Tyr's name corresponds etymologically to that of the Greek Zeus and the Indic Dyaus. Overall the god Tyr remains an obscure figure in the Germanic sources, yet he is often assumed to once have been a more powerful god and the head of the Germanic pantheon. Outside of linguistics, there is no evidence to support this claim. Although Jacob Grimm's etymologies helped elevate Tyr to the status of Sky-father, Grimm himself did not draw this conclusion. He wrote:

“These intricate etymologies were not to be avoided; they entitle us to claim a sphere for the Teutonic god Zio, Tiw, Tyr which places him on a level with the loftiest deities of antiquity. Represented in the Edda as Odin's son, he may seem inferior to him in power at the moment; but the two really fall into one, inasmuch as both are directors of war and battle, and the fame of victory proceeds from them alike.” (Stalleybrass tr., p. 196)

At its very root, the identification of Tyr with the Sky-father is based on a comparison of the name Tyr with the names of other Indo-European Sky-fathers. While it is true that the name Tyr is cognate with **Dyeus*, the god Tyr is not. He is never referred to as father and is not associated with the sky in the Germanic record. He possesses none of the attributes characteristic of the Indo-European Sky-father. If Tyr ever held such a position, no record of it remains. Tyr's name simply means “god” and is closely connected with other words meaning “god” and “divinity” in Germanic languages. All else are assumptions. German scholar Rudolf Simek observes:

“The Old Scandinavian name for the Germanic god of the sky, war, and council **Tiwaz* (OHG Ziu) who is the only Germanic god who was already important in Indo-European times: Old Indic Dyaus, Greek Zeus, Latin Jupiter ...ON *tívar*, (plural to *Týr*) are all closely related etymologically to each other. ...Despite his early importance, Tyr is a relatively unimportant god in the ON mythology of the Eddas. ...He *must have* played a more important role at some stage as is clear from the plural of his name *tívar* meaning ‘gods’ as well as the fact that in skaldic poetry his name could be used as the basic word in

¹² For a detailed explanation of this “Lethe Effect,” particularly in northern regions, see Paul T. Barber and Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky*, (Princeton University, 2004), p. 19.

¹³ West, *ibid*, pp. 134-135.

kennings for other gods, especially for Odin; this proves that his name originally, but still in Viking times, could simply mean ‘god,’” (*Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, s.v. Týr)

This apparent etymological identity between Týr and *Dyeus, and the speculations that followed, led subsequent scholars to hypothesize that a local war-god named Odin had usurped Týr’s functions in the past, beginning some time in the 6th century when the name Odin first appeared, and that his cult quickly spread becoming a pan-Germanic in a few short centuries. Not only is such a rapid spread of a cult extremely unlikely, there is no historical basis for such a major shift in the Germanic religion, in either the literary or the archaeological record.

Today, scholars take a much more circumspect approach, suggesting instead that Odin may have “stepped into an older scheme in which the Sky became father of the gods and men in marriage to the Earth,”¹⁴ Martin L. West writes:

“A Germanic reflex of the god *Dyeus is not readily identified, since (as already noted) the Nordic Týr and his continental cognates seem to derive their names from the generic title **deiwós* and do not resemble *Dyeus in character. It is possible, however, that Wodan-Odin (proto-Germanic **Woðanaz*) while not being a direct continuation of *Dyeus took over certain of his features. In Lombardic myth as retailed by Paulus Diaconus (1.8), Wodan was imagined habitually surveying the earth from his window, beginning at sunrise. This corresponds to the position of Odin in the Eddas. He has the highest seat among the gods, and from it surveys all the worlds, rather as Zeus, sitting on the peak of Mt. Ida, can survey not only the Troad, but Thrace and Scythia too. Odin also has the distinctive title of father. In the poems he is called *Alföðr*, ‘All-father.’”¹⁵

Ursula Dronke concurs, noting that, Odin or his Indo-European ancestor is best interpreted as a solar deity, who, like the sun, had only one eye that sees everything. He travels and visits the homes of men like the sun, and as the originator of life, “like the sun, he is *Alföðr*.” His eclipse, like the sun’s, is to be swallowed by a wolf. Dronke concludes that “this vast background of archaic fragments” helps to explain Odin’s place as the highest of the gods in Germanic mythology.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* Martin L. West, (2007), p. 183

¹⁵ West, *ibid*, p. 173

¹⁶ Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, Vol. 2, p. 126.

