Odin's Wife:
Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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The Prehistoric Context

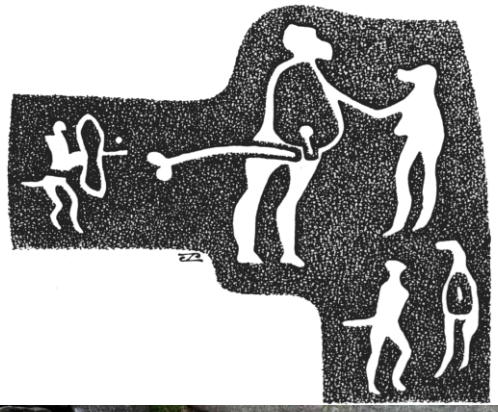
It is widely held that a considerable continuity exists in both the archaeological and physical anthropological records of northern Europe, from the earliest appearance of the Germans back into the Bronze Age.[1] Linguists typically date the first Germanic sound-shifts, making the dialect distinct from its Proto-Indo-European mother to 500 BC. The Germans first emerge in history around 100 AD, occupying the north European plain from Flanders in the west to the Vistula river in the east; they also occupied at least southern Scandinavia.[2] The earliest examples of the Germanic language are contained in runic inscriptions that date from 300 AD onward.[3]

Early Germanic Literature and Culture, Edited by Brian Murdoch and Malcolm Read. p. 75

> "It is impossible to mark the beginnings of Germanic religion. There are continuities, but also distinct changes, in the religious beliefs between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, as well as from the neolithic period to the Bronze Age. No scholar today, however, is prepared to talk of a Germanic ethnicity in the population of northwestern Europe before the beginnings of the Iron Age, which may be dated to 400 B.C. for southern Scandinavia. Beyond that, we may only talk of a prehistory of the northern European religion, but we cannot seriously establish the ethnicity of the tribes in question. Our knowledge of this prehistoric religion is mainly confined to the beliefs and customs regarding death and the after-world, and to scenes depicted in the rock carvings, which become particularly enigmatic in the southern Scandinavian Bronze Age, even though we can identify them as of religious relevance. In the Iron Age, however, despite the paucity of grave goods in comparison with the Bronze Age, our knowledge of pagan religion becomes much more detailed, especially as far as the sacrificial customs are concerned, and in several cases we can, despite all the gaps in our knowledge, reconstruct ceremonies relatively well."

[1] Mallory and Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), p. 223.
[2] Mallory and Adams, (2006), ibid, p. 19.
[3] Mallory and Adams, (2006), ibid, p. 22.

Along with a common language, the people would naturally also carry a common religion, a store of knowledge and a set of rituals and customs, that gave meaning to the world and their place in it. For this reason, religious writings are typically among the oldest preserved by a literate culture. Scholars of comparative religion have determined that one of the oldest Indo-European myths is that of the mating of the Sky with the Earth at the beginning of time.[4] Among the West Germanic branch, images symbolizing the *hieros gamos* (sacred wedding) are clearly present in the earliest artworks. Bronze Age petroglyphs from the southern and middle provinces of Scandinavia, dating from at least 1200 until around 500 BC, are among the earliest evidence of cult activity in northern Europe. These ancient stone carvings, sometimes difficult to interpret, contain figures and symbols depicting ritual activity. In them, ship scenes, dance scenes, hunting and farming scenes, as well as evidence of ritual processions can be discerned. The religion which these carvings embody seems to have been primarily concerned with the fundamental principle of life.[5] Among these images are frequently found couples locked in an embrace— one of the pair sporting an erect phallus directed toward the other— which is most often interpreted as the sexual union of man and woman. They are sometimes associated with agricultural symbols, such as the wheel and plow.

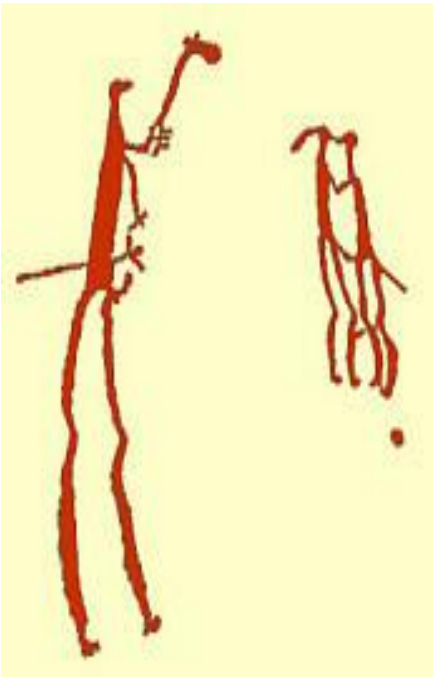


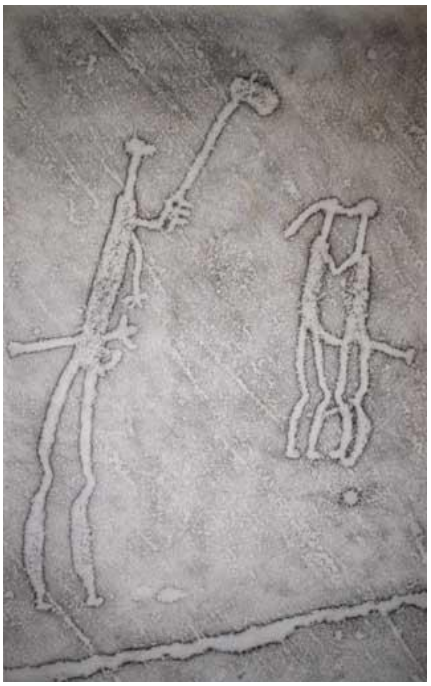
[4] Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda, Vol. II*, p. 396.
[5] Gelling and Davidson, *The Chariot of the Sun* (Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), p. 79.

The belief that it is possible to influence the fertility of the land through ritual sexual intercourse is well documented.[6] As Karen Armstrong explains, in *A Short History of Myth*:

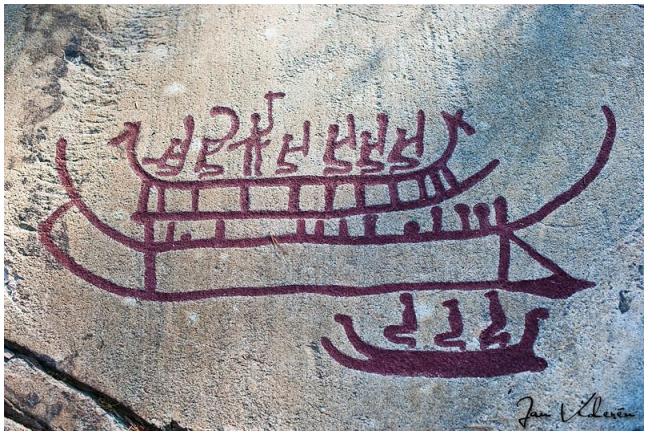
> "It was common for men and women to engage in ritual sex when they planted crops. Their own intercourse, itself a sacred act, would activate the creative energies of the soil, just as the farmer's spade or plough was a sacred phallus that opened the womb of the earth and made it big with seed." (p. 43)

We also find evidence of this in Scandinavia. In 1868, when faced with the threat of a catastrophic drought and impending crop failure, the people of a town in Dalsland, Sweden, fell back on an old superstition that suggested "there was only one way to achieve the desired result, namely to carry out certain prescribed ceremonies and have one couple copulate on the petroglyphs at Tisselskog, where the images of several mating couples had been carved." This account demonstrates that the belief in the efficacy of ritual marriage survived down to recent times.[7]



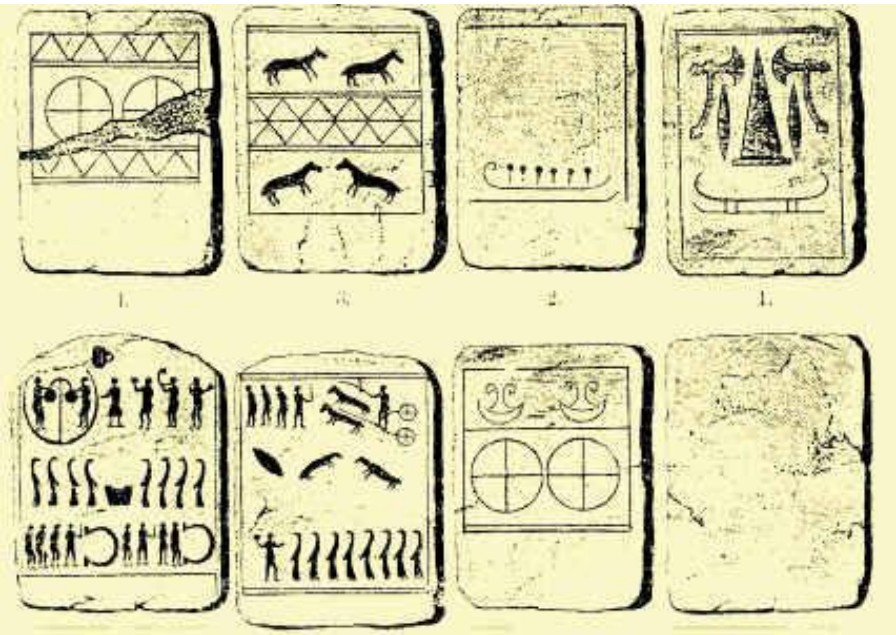


[6] Gelling and Davidson, ibid, p. 68; see also Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, (DS Brewer, 1995), pp. 135-140.
[7] Fred Gudnitz, *Broncealderens monumentalkunst* (1962), p. 70; cited and translated by Gunnell, ibid, p. 138.



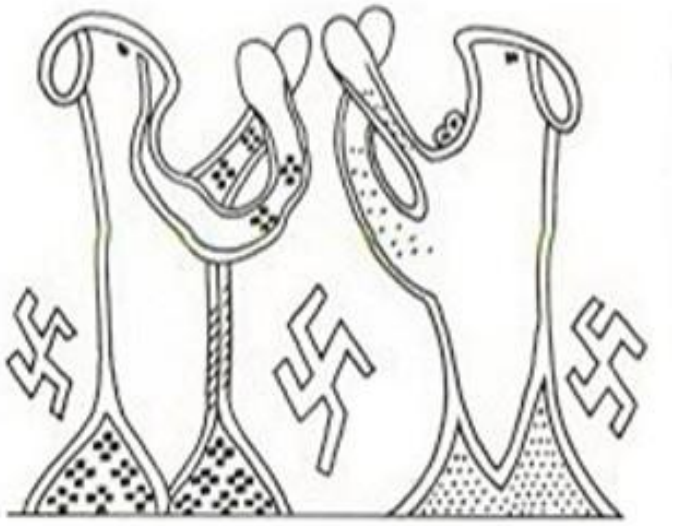
In these rock carvings, these couples are sometimes accompanied by a larger figure wielding an axe.[8] We can be fairly confident that the axe-bearer had a name and a myth, although we can never be sure what they were.[9] This figure is most frequently interpreted as a god consecrating the couple on the belief that at that moment, malignant spirits might attempt to blight the beneficent influence of this ceremony. His task, therefore, would be to keep them at bay.[10] In the Eddaic poem *Þrymskviða*, we find a functional analog. Thor the giant-killer is said to customarily consecrate marriages with his hammer, and when it is stolen by giants who demand the goddess Freyja as wife for its ransom, Thor must dress as her and agree to wed the giant or risk losing this weapon forever. At the end of the mock ceremony, the hammer is laid in Thor's (i.e. the "bride's") lap as expected. He takes it up and slays the giant. The short handled hammer is an obvious phallic symbol when laid in the bride's lap. This is the source of Thor's strength, and the safety of the gods themselves.

[8] Reproduced in *The Chariot of the Sun*, p. 66.
[9] McKinnell, ibid, p. 48.
[10] Gelling and Davidson, ibid, p. 68.



Further evidence of ritual activity in the Swedish Bronze Age occurs in images on the Kivik grave tablets from south-east Skåne.[11] Of particular interest is the appearance of eight 'female' figures in long dresses on either side of what seems to be a cauldron. These figures have what has been characterized as bird heads.

The appearance of a number of winged and beaked human "bird" figures in the petroglyphs near Bohuslän, Sweden suggests that this motif was not uncommon in the religious processions of the time.[12] Similar figures appear on the Oseberg tapestry (c. 850 AD) in poses that suggest they are dancing.



[11] The images are reproduced at http://web.telia.com/~u31118336/stone_struck/kivik.htm
[12] Gunnell, ibid, p. 47.

Again, we find functional analogs in Old Norse myth and legend. In *Þrymskviða*, the goddesses Freyja is said to own a falcon guise, which she lends to Loki. *Skáldskaparmál* informs us that Frigg does too; while in the poem *Völundarkviða* and its corresponding continental legends, the elf-smith Völund and his brothers wed swan-maidens who wear feather dresses allowing them to fly. Although some scholars have suggested that the scenes described above represent mythical or otherworldly activity, it seems obvious that these images are based on contemporary religious activities.[13] The artists are most likely representing actual events familiar to them, at least in part. This is made evident by the inclusion of *lurer* in the pictures since many such instruments have been discovered in Norway and Denmark.[14] These instruments are sometimes depicted as played by horned and possibly tailed figures, implying that costumed actors played an active part in the ceremonies. The prominent horns and exaggerated calves of these figures have led some scholars to suggest they are disguised as goats.[15]

[13] Terry Gunnell, ibid p. 39.

[14] At least one hundred Bronze Age horns, many of them occurring in pairs like those depicted in the petroglyphs, have been recovered in Demark and Norway alone (Gunnell, ibid, p. 41).

[15] Terry Gunnell, ibid, p. 41; Gelling, (ibid. p. 112-113), suggests that the pronounced calves of these carefully-drawn horned figures were perhaps intended to represent skins wrapped around the legs as part of a goat-disguise.

Another recurring feature in these Bronze Age rock carvings is the ship, often filled with figures. Large figures in a ship among smaller figures are thought to represent giant effigies constructed to represent the god.[16] A pair of wooden images found near Eutin in Schleswig-Holstein confirm that such images were made.[17] These lively ship scenes often include sun wheels, phallic figures, and figures dancing or playing instruments, all indicative of ritual activity. Sometimes acrobatic figures appear above them as if leaping and tumbling as part of the ceremony.[18] The *hieros gamos* is frequently depicted as taking place on a ship, sometimes with figures waving axes or weapons overhead.[19] Sometimes the ship is carried by a giant figure thought to represent a god, which may suggest that models of ships and other cult vehicles were used in ritual activities. Examples of model ships and model chariots also have been discovered, the most famous being the Trondholm sun-chariot found in 1902.

[16] This recalls the wicker images that the Gauls used to sacrifice human victims (Caesar, IV, 16).
[17] Gelling and Davidson, ibid, pp. 55-56.
[18] Such a figure was found in Zealand Denmark, dated to 600 BC, cast in bronze and associated with a ceremonial model ship. Pictured in Jean-Pierre Mohen and Christiane Eluère, *The Bronze Age in Europe*, (Harry and Adams, 1993), p. 95; Grimm notes (pp. 1241-1242) that the culture of flax is not without its ceremonies. "In some places, at sowing time, the mistress of the house used to get on the table and dance, then jump off backwards: the higher she made the leap, the higher the flax would grow." Gelling and Davidson suggest a similar meaning for the leaping figures.
[19] Gelling and Davidson, ibid., p. 49.

The consistency of these motifs through time across the northern European region is remarkable. Bronze Age figurines found in Grenvenvænge wear horned helmets like those pictured in the petroglyphs. One thousand years later, horned helmets of the same kind appear on one of the Torslunda helmet matrices and in other Iron Age pictorial works such as the Oseberg tapestry.[20] In addition, images of horned and apparently masked figures with close parallels to the earlier, cultic Bronze Age rock carvings, appear in images on the Gallehus horns (c. 400 AD), including that of a horn-bearing female figure, so often encountered in later Scandinavian art. The idea that horned headgear was associated with religious activity finds further support in a bronze and gold horned headdress found deposited in a bog near Hagendrup in northwest Sjælland. The headdress is too small for an adult and therefore may have been placed on an idol.[21] The Måltegarden urn lid (c. 600 BC),[22] which shares many similarities with Swedish petroglyphs depicting the *hieros gamos*, contains the additional motif of a plant or ear of corn placed behind the female figure. This motif sometimes accompanies the more common image of an embracing couple on the minute gold foils known as *Guldgubbar* found in Sweden, Norway and Denmark from 500 AD to the early Viking period, like those found in Hange, Rogaland, in Norway, in which the female figure of the couple is shown holding a plant. The recurrence of these images over such a great expanse of space and time indicates the longevity and conservatism of pagan religious iconography in northern Europe.[23] While no firm conclusions can be drawn about the beliefs and religion of the artists, all that can be stated is that this religion is probably Indo-European in origin.[24] Thus we may justly seek parallels with other Indo-European branches, especially those which migrated to Western Europe.

[20] Gunnell, ibid., p. 43.
[21] Gunnell, ibid, p. 43.
[22] The image is reproduced in Magnus Magnusson, *Hammer of the North*, (Putnum, 1976), pp. 76-77.
[23] Gunnell, ibid, p. 49.
[24] Gunnell, ibid, p. 39.

Organized agriculture has existed in northern Europe since late Neolithic times and archaeological evidence of agricultural activity is found throughout Bronze Age Scandinavia. Because the survival of a farming community often depended on the productivity of the land, superstitions naturally rose up around cultivation. From the earliest iconographical evidence, agricultural motifs frequently recur, indicating its religious significance to the people residing there. Prior to the invention of the modern plow, which turns soil over, a digging implement known as an ard was used to cut furrows for sowing seed. An ard has a spike that cuts a single furrow as it is pulled along, Primitive societies throughout the world still use it. It can be drawn by either a human or by animals. In northern Europe, the ard was first tipped with stone or bone, and later fitted with a metal cap.[25] Its use continued in northern Europe until the Middle Ages. Examples of the ard dating from 1500 BC have been found in bogs near Horslev, Denmark, and evidence exists of the ritual burial of ards in the British Isles, Denmark, and northern Germany as early as the third millennium BC.[26] An ard was also found in a series of unmarked graves at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, dated to the seventh or eighth century AD. In Vindumhede, Denmark, hair plaits found alongside an ard suggest a link with a women's cult.[27]

[25] Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 59.
[26] Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 60.
[27] P.V. Glob, *Ard og Plov in Nordens Oldtid*, (Aarhus University Press, 1951), p 105. Widespread traditions across the Indo-European horizon dictate that shorn hair be buried. This practice may be explained in a cosmogonical myth based on various Indo-European sources which identify parts of the human body as alloforms of natural phenomena, e.g. wind becomes breath and plants become hair. Conversely, treatments for baldness in traditional Indo-European approaches to medicine often involve the application of plants, as an alloform of hair. See JP Mallory and DQ Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, s.v. "Cosmogony", p. 129. Grass and trees are frequently described as the tresses of the Earth-goddess.

In a group of petroglyphs from Bohuslän, Sweden, two ards drawn by cattle are associated with a large group of figures accompanied by sun-discs. Although the scene is difficult to interpret, it appears as if a sun-disc is erected at the edge of a cultivated field, where an ard pulled by two animals cuts a furrow to the lively acclamation of bystanders.[28] Another image from Litsleby[29] depicts a man with an erect penis driving a plow pulled by two horned draught animals.[30] In one hand he holds a budding branch or a small tree and in the other an undefined object which may be a mallet or seedbag. Two furrows are indicated by horizontal lines at the bottom of the picture and the man is clearly shown at the beginning of a third.[31] Hilda Davidson compares this Bronze Age scene with a nineteenth century custom recorded in Uppland of plowing three special furrows on the first day of spring. She writes:

> "[Oscar] Almgren (1927, p. 301) …describes how the sod had to be turned up in the direction of the sun, and some of the earth rubbed on the forelocks of the horses, while the ploughman was given bread which had been baked at Yule and stored in the corn-bin. A branch from a fruit-bearing tree was carried by the plowman or fixed on the horses reins; this custom was known in Småland and Scania up to 1921."[32]

It hardly need be pointed out that the scene Almgren describes is remarkably similar to the one depicted on the petroglyph described above and consistent with later tilling customs recorded in England and Germany. In the Celtic and Roman Iron Age, the ard was replaced by the wheeled plow on farms across northern Europe. Powerful animals were needed to draw this heavier and more efficient implement. Oxen continued to be used because they are slow and strong, and the more docile cows were preferred over the males, as they were easier to manage.[33] Many customs and superstitions —some of them quite odd sounding today— developed around this activity and were recorded in the late 19th century by such scholars as Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Mannhardt. According to German ordinances known as *Weisthümer*[34] recorded by Grimm, a loaf must be stuck on the axle of the plow before cutting the first furrow; if a plow breaks a wheel, the plowman must provide a loaf "*baked from every kind of grain the plow doth*

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[28] Gelling and Davidson, ibid, p. 80.
[29] A region in West Sweden.
[30] The image is reproduced on page 59 of Davidson's *Roles of the Northern Goddess* and Gelling and Davidson, ibid, p. 74.
[31] Gelling and Davidson, ibid, p. 79.
[32] Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 59
[33] P.J. Reynolds, *Iron Age Farm: The Butser Experiment*, (British Museum, 1979), p. 50.
[34] J. Grimm, *Weisthümer*, 7 volumes, Goettingen 1840-1872.

win"— a commonly recurring motif[35] —and another such ordinance dictates that the loaf must be as large as the plow-wheel itself. Grimm saw these "curious regulations" as vague recollections of earlier sacrificial loaves laid in the first furrow.[36]

Classically trained scholar Sir James George Frazer noted a parallel from southern Europe. He explains that in Thesmophoria, it was customary to throw pigs, cakes of dough, and pine branches into caverns sacred to Demeter and Persephone. During the next annual festival, women who had been ritually purified for three days descended into the caverns to retrieve the decayed remains of the pigs, the cakes, and the pine-branches and brought them to an altar. The decayed matter was then sown with the grain to ensure a good crop. This ancient ritual was explained by a legend that held that when Pluto carried off Persephone, a swineherd called Eubuleus happened to be herding his swine on the spot, and his herd thus vanished along with Persephone. Frazer draws attention to analogues in the folk-customs of northern Europe, particularly the practice in Hesse and Meiningen of roasting a pig on Ash Wednesday or Candlemas (Feburary 2nd) and keeping the bones till sowing-time, when they are put into the field or mixed with the seed. The corn from the last sheaf is often kept until Christmas and made into a boar-shaped cake. In the spring it is broken and mixed with the seed.[37] In Scania, a salted pig's head from the Yule feast was kept and given to the plowman and his horses to eat on the first day of plowing in the spring.[38] In Sjælland, an incomplete plow was buried with parts of a wagon and the bones of cattle, sheep and pigs. In North Germany, a plow was found that was accompanied by human skulls and animal bones, suggesting a sacrifice.[39] Despite Frazer's simplistic interpretations of them, the northern European harvest customs cataloged by him clearly have elements in common with the Greek traditions concerning Demeter and thus, as Hilda Davidson believes, deserve fresh consideration.[40] In this regard, the association of harvest cakes with swine should not be overlooked.

Besides their capacity for breeding, wild pigs have long snouts and tusks and their ability to turn over soil when foraging may account for their association with agriculture. In northern European iconography, the use of the boar emblem is pervasive. In one of the earliest accounts of Germanic pagan customs, *Germania*, Tacitus speaks of a Germanic tribe known as the Aestii whose language resembles that of the British (ch. 45). They worship the *Mother of the Gods* and wear the figure of a wild boar as the emblem of her cult. Here the boar is connected not only with a Mother goddess but with agricultural activity. Tacitus says that the Aestii prefer clubs to iron weapons and cultivate grain and other crops with a perseverance unusual among the Germans. A connection between the boar and agriculture survived for many centuries. Grimm cites an early Latin commentary by Verelius (17th century) on *Hervararsaga* which says that Swedish peasants, after baking a cake known as the *jula-galt*,[41] dry some of it and keep it until spring. They then grate a portion of it and feed it to the plow-horses and another part to the plow-men. In the popular belief of Thuringia, whoever abstained from eating until dinnertime on

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[35] cp. a loaf "of *the grain that the farm beareth and the mill breaketh*", "*a cake of all grain that the mill grinds*." Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, (Stalleybrass tr), p. 1240-1241.
[36] Grimm, ibid. p. 1240.
[37] *The Golden Bough*, chs. 48-49.
[38] Davidson, ibid, p. 64.
[39] Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, pp. 60-61.
[40] Davidson, ibid, p. 69.
[41] Literally "Yule-boar", a loaf or cake baked in the shape of a boar; Grimm, ibid, p. 51, probably related to the *sonargaltr*, sacrificial boar dedicated to Frey annually.

Christmas, would catch sight of *a golden pig*.[42] In practical terms, this may have been the last and finest course of the meal, since a Laueterbach *weisthum* of 1589 decrees that a *goldferch*, a hog gelded before it is weened, be lead around the benches on Three Kings Day (therefore Yule), probably before it was slaughtered. In the same region, when the wind sets the corn stalks in motion, they sometimes say, "The Boar is rushing through the corn." In the Netherlands, "Derk with the boar" makes his rounds and looks after the ploughs.[43] In the same vein, when Frey rides to Baldur's funeral in Snorri's *Edda*, he is said to drive in a cart drawn by his golden boar, *Gullinbursti* ("Golden-bristles). Frey's connection with grain is made clear in *Lokasenna* 45, where his servant is named *Byggvir*.[44] In *Skáldskaparmál* 14, Frey is called *árguð*, harvest god. *Gylfaginning* 24 confirms this, saying *hann ræðr fyrir regni ok skini sólar ok þar með ávexti jarðar, ok á hann er gott at heita til árs ok friðar*, "he is ruler of rain and sunshine, and thus of the produce of the earth, and it is good to pray to him for prosperity and peace." From all this, it is evident that a long history of agricultural customs associated with ritual and ceremony, with close affinities to those of other Indo-European peoples, have existed in northern Europe since the prehistoric era.

[42] Grimm, ibid., p. 51.
[43] Grimm, ibid, p. 268.
[44] Byggvir, from *bygg*, 'barley' Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda* Vol. II, p. 368.