

Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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II. Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth

“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.”

—Terry Gunnell,

The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia, (1995), p.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 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 propose 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 “ancient lays” (*carmina antiqua*) constitute the only record of their history, among the Germans, Rives observes:

“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 *Atlaqvíða*, 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

¹ J.B. Rives, Tacitus *Germania*, (1999), p. 51.

² Rives, *ibid.*, p. 66.

³ Rives, *ibid.*, p. 109.

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The *Germania* is divided into two halves. The first discusses the common customs of the Germanic people *en masse*. The second speaks of individual tribes leading the reader on, so to speak, a tour of Germania. While the first half of *Germania* (ch. 1-27) deals with the *Germani* as a whole, defining their boundaries, describing their origins, and detailing their customs, the organization of the second half is markedly different, providing specific information about distinct groups, beginning with those residing beyond the Rhine (chapters 28-37), then moving to those dwelling beyond the Danube (ch. 38-45) and lastly to those of unknown ethnicity, living on the outskirts of the known world (ch. 46). At least some of the information in the later chapters relates to the northernmost tribes whose religion had much in common with that of the those 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



Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth
An Abridged History of England, 1840

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 *Angli*, the ancestors of the English Angles. Tacitus writes:

⁴ *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, Rory McTurk ed. (2005). Chapter 17: *Pagan Myth and Religion*, by Peter Orton, p. 303.

⁵ Orton, *ibid.*, p. 303.

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“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

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 fifteenth century or later. These variant readings are: *Nerthum, Nertum, Neithum, Nebertum, Nectum, 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, the authority behind Grimm’s Law 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 *berda* might seem to plead for it, the termination *-us* is against it.”⁸ Thus, the assertion by Lotte Motz that Grimm selected the name “because it coincides phonetically with Njörðr” is without foundation.⁹ Modern scholars, knowledgeable of linguistics, support the reading *Nerthum*. John McKinnell, compelled to respond to the growing chorus of late twentieth 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.

⁶ A.R. Birley, translator; Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany* (1999), p. 58.

⁷ John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, p. 50.

⁸ Grimm, *ibid.*, p. 251.

⁹ Lotte Motz, *The King, The Champion and the Sorcerer* (1996), pg. 116. Emphasis by Motz.

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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, *Æsinas* 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*.¹⁰

The form *Hertha* is a false reading of comparatively modern origin. In 1519, Rhenanus, the pious scholar who published Tacitus, wrote *Herthum* for *Nerthum*, manifestly the same as the Old High German *Herda*, earth. Based on his authority, the text of Tacitus was uniformly given as *Herthum* up until 1817, when editors such as Franz Passow restored *Nerthum* to the Latin text.¹¹ That the name Nerthus is grammatically masculine in form has led some critics such as Klaus von See¹² 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 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 Earth-Mother. 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

¹⁰ McKinnell, *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹¹ *Gentleman's Magazine* (Feb. 1856), p. 143 in "Heligoland" by William Bell.

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

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 (1997).

¹⁴ *cp.* McKinnell, p. 51 ff.: Grimm, *ibid.*, p. 255, first brought these connections to light, identifying an Indian analog in Bhavani, wife of Shiva. His quoting the sources at length made it unnecessary to highlight their obvious differences.

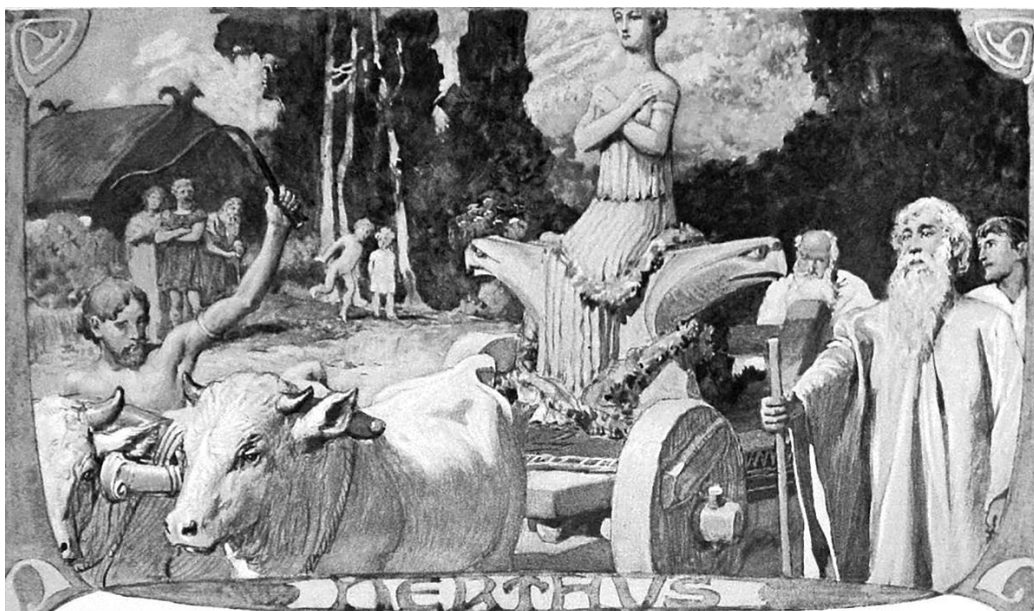
¹⁵ Grimm, *ibid.*, p. 254 citing Lucretius 2, 597.

¹⁶ North, *ibid.*, p. 21.

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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. Instead of wild lions, her car was drawn by domestic cattle.²⁰ A single priest, rather than a motley crew, attended her and only he was allowed to touch her sacred vehicle.



The Nerthus Procession
Carl Emil Doepler Jr., 1905

¹⁷ *De Rerum Natura*, Book 2, 600 ff.

¹⁸ cp. Cattulus, Poem 63.

¹⁹ Source: <http://abacus.bates.edu/~mimber/Rciv/Megalesiaci.htm> (last viewed 1/2/2011).

²⁰ "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. 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, p. 185).

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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.²¹ 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 Snorri's *Edda*, Thor drives a wagon drawn by goats, Freyr 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 the wagon" in a skaldic strophe cited in the primary manuscript of Snorri's *Edda*; where other manuscripts have *Vana guð* ('god of the Vanir'), *Codex Regius* has *vagna guð*.²² 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.²³

Other Germanic literary sources also support the procession of an idol in a wagon among the northern European tribes. In the latter half of the fourth century, the Church historian Sozomen (c. 400–450 AD), writing of the dangers that beset Ulphilas [Wulfias] among the heathen Goths, recounts how Athanaric, chieftain of the Thervingians, appointed Winguric (Wingureiks), a *godi*, to eradicate the Christian faith from the land. He placed a *xoanon* (wooden idol) in an *armamaxa* (covered carriage) and ordered 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 tents were set ablaze.²⁴ Sozomen says:

“[Ulphilas] exposed himself to innumerable perils in defense of the faith, during the period that the aforesaid barbarians were abandoned to paganism. He taught them the use of letters, and translated the sacred scriptures into their own language. ...Athanaric resented the change in religion that had been effected by Ulphilas; and irritated because his subjects had abandoned the superstition of their fathers, he imposed cruel punishments on many individuals; some he put to death after they had been dragged before tribunals and had nobly confessed the faith, and others were slain without being permitted to utter a single word in their own defense. It is said that the officers appointed by Athanaric to execute his cruel mandates, caused a statue to be constructed, which they placed on a chariot, and had it conveyed to the tents of those who were suspected of having embraced Christianity, and who were therefore commanded to worship the statue and offer sacrifice: if they refused to do so, they were burnt alive in their tents. But I have heard that an outrage of still greater atrocity was perpetrated at this period. Men, women, and children, who were compelled to offer sacrifice, fled from their tents

²¹ E.O.G. Turville-Petre, 'Fertility of Beast and Soil' in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium*, ed. Edgar Polomé, (1969), pp. 249-252.

²² North, *ibid.*, p. 24.

²³ *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.

²⁴ North, *ibid.*, p. 147.

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and sought refuge in a church, whither also they carried the infants at the breast; the pagans set fire to the church and consumed it, with all who were therein.”²⁵

In Crimea, Winguric paraded the idol before a tent used by Christians for their church service. Those who honored the idol were spared, and the rest were burned alive in their place of worship around the year 375 AD. A total of 308 people died in the fire, of which twenty-one are known by name, written with multiple variants in manuscript. A woman called Baren or Beride, also recorded as Larisa, led the congregation in a hymn as the fire consumed them. The so-called “26 Gothic Martyrs” linked to this incident are commemorated on March 26 in the Christian Orthodox calendar and on October 29 in the Gothic calendar fragment, “in remembrance of the martyrs who with Werekas the priest and Batwin the *bilaiif* (minister?) were burned in a crowded church among the Goths,” *gaminþi marvtré þize bi Werekas papan jah Batwin bilaiif aikelesjons fullaizos ana Gutþindai gabrannidai*.²⁶ It is noteworthy that Athanaric did not persecute Christians in general, but primarily members of his own community who had converted. Since the purpose of the procession seems to be to promote prosperity, Carla O'Harris has suggested that Athanaric's true motivation in persecuting the converts may have been their unwillingness to participate in the time-honored rituals that would insure the well-being of the land, and therefore the community at large. His chosen means of execution, death by fire, may indicate that Athanaric saw the Christians as practitioners of witchcraft, whose religious rites would offend the gods and thereby blight the land.

In the late sixth century, Gregory of Tours recounted what has been described as the “very last Western evidence of a ritual precisely described as dedicated to the Mother of the Gods.”²⁷ In an anecdote marking the end of the old religion, he described the procession of a goddess called Berecynthia (probably a Roman interpretation of a local goddess), as she was drawn through fields and vineyards in a wheeled vehicle known as a *carpentum* (carriage) or *plaustrum* (wagon) “according to the wretched custom of the pagans” in order to ensure their prosperity, while the people sang and danced before her.²⁸ During her festival at Augustodunum near Lyon, Simplicius, the bishop of Autun (d. 418), 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.²⁹ According to local recensions of the *Passion of St. Symphorianus* of Autun from the early fifth century, Symphorian, the son of a senator named Faustus, was beheaded around the year 180 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius for refusing to worship the goddess. Autun is described as a city of many temples filled with idols. Berecynthia, Apollo and Diana were especially venerated. On a certain day, rustic people performed

²⁵ *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI, 37, translated by Edward Walford as *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen* (1855), pp. 306-7.

²⁶ George W. S. Friedrichsen, 'Notes on the Gothic Calendar (Cod. Ambros. A)', *Modern Language Review* 22 (1927); The ‘twenty-six’ martyrs include the twenty-one who are named, Batwin’s four children, and an anonymous man who ran up to confess his faith as the tent began to burn.

²⁷ Philippe Borgeaud, *Mother of the Gods*, (2004), p. 122.

²⁸ *Liber in Gloria Confessorum* 77 cited by H.E. Davidson in *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (1993), p. 133, partially translated in North, *ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁹ Pamela Berger, after Harmening’s *Superstitio*, pp. 43-48 notes “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* (1985), p. 37.

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"unholy" ceremonies dedicated to Berecynthia, "the mother of demons" (*matris daemonum*). They conveyed her statue in a cart, followed by a multitude of people gathered together in procession. Symphorian refused to adore the statue and so was taken to the local authorities. When asked by the Roman consul why he refused to worship the idol, he responded that, as a Christian, he would not adore the statue of a demon. For this offense, he was martyred. That such processions were a familiar sight in Roman Gaul is made evident in chapter 12 of the *Life of Saint Martin of Tours* (c. 316-397) by Sulpitius Severus, who wrote:

"While Martin was going a journey, he met the body of a certain heathen, which was being carried to the tomb with superstitious funeral rites. Perceiving from a distance the crowd that was approaching, and being ignorant as to what was going on, he stood still for a little while. For there was a distance of nearly half a mile between him and the crowd, so that it was difficult to discover what the spectacle he beheld really was. Nevertheless, because he saw it was a rustic gathering, and when the linen clothes spread over the body were blown about by the action of the wind, he believed that some profane rites of sacrifice (*profanes sacrificiorum ritus*) were being performed. This thought occurred to him, because it was the custom of the Gallic rustics in their wretched folly to carry about through the fields the images of demons veiled with a white covering."

Upon closer inspection, he discovered that "they were simply a band of peasants celebrating funeral rites, and not sacrifices to the gods."³⁰ Along the same lines, the conveyance among his people of King Frotho III's body in a wagon for three years after his death as told by Saxo Grammaticus in *Gesta Danorum* at the end of chapter 5 is sometimes cited as another example of such a procession. Germanic kings were also known to do this on occasion while alive. Like Nerthus who rode in a wagon drawn by cows, the Carolinian historian Einhard tells us that once a year, the ruler of the Merovingian dynasty drove an "old fashioned" cart pulled by bulls through the countryside.³¹ The bulls that pulled the cart were considered special, like the kings they transported. Hence, the theft of those beasts would impose a sanction two and a half times higher than that of a gelded ox. Although the purpose of the procession is not stated, the metal head of a bull bearing a solar disk was recovered from the tomb of Meroveus' son, Childeric I, at Tournai (now in Belgium) in 1653, suggesting a link to a fertility cult.³²

This connection between the bull, a fertility god and the Merovingians is perhaps best understood by consideration of a myth preserved by the seventh century historian known as pseudo-Fredegar. Interpolating the work of Gregory of Tours, he tells a story about the conception of Merovech, the eponymous founder of the dynasty. According to him, the Frankish king Chlodio, known as the long-haired king, was taking a summer bath with his wife, when she was attacked by a creature from the sea, which Fredegar calls a *Quinotaur*, Latin for "bull with five horns." The text describes the creature

³⁰ Translated by Alexander Roberts. *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 11. (1894).

³¹ *Einhardi Vita Caroli Magni*, 1. In MHG, *Scriptores rerum Sangallensium. Annales, chronica et historiae aevi Saxonici*, Hannover, (1829).

³² Gelling and Davidson, *ibid.*, p. 163-164, which shows a sketch of the artifact, now lost.

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as *bestea Neptuni*, “a beast of Neptune.” When she bore a son, it was unknown whether the boy was conceived by the man, Chlodio, or the beast from the sea. At its very foundation, the Merovingian dynasty was associated with a fertility cult involving cattle and the sea. In Greek mythology, the Minotaur was conceived in a similar fashion. Minos, king of the island of Crete prayed to Poseidon to send him a pure white bull as a sign of support. The sea-god granted his wish expecting Minos to sacrifice the creature to him, but upon seeing the magnificent bull Minos decided to keep it for himself, and sacrificed another instead. To punish him, Poseidon filled Minos's wife, Pasiphaë, with lust for the creature. She secretly had the artisan Daedalus craft a cow guise for her in order to mate with the white bull from the sea. Their offspring was the terrible Minotaur.



Procession of a Merovingian King
Alphonse de Neuville, 1875

Other relevant examples of ritual processions cited by scholars include the description of Thor's chariot at a temple in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, the moving image of Thor kept on an island in the north of Norway as told in *Rögnvalds þáttur ok Rauðs*, and the account in *Hauks þáttur hábrókar* of an otherwise unknown god named Lytir, who traveled to a sacrifice at Uppsala in a special wagon that awaited his arrival for three nights. However, the most frequently cited and the strongest parallel confirming the details of the seasonal circuit made by Nerthus in *Germania* remains the Icelandic *Gunnars þáttur helmings*.³³ The tale, dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, is a religious parody recounting the plight of a man named Gunnar who flees from Norway to Sweden in the first year of Ólaf'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”).³⁴

³³ Preserved in the *Flateyjarbók*, it forms the second half of *Ogmundar þáttur dytts* in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*.

³⁴ *með okkur Freyr þá er hann skal gera mönnum arbót*, “drive with Freyr and he shall give help with crops,” cp. Freyr's designation *árguð* in *Skáldskaparmál* 14 and Chapter III: The Anglo-Saxon *Æcerbót*.

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Freyr and Skirnir
Alexander Zick, 1901

In this procession, Freyr and his bride, represented by a wooden idol accompanied by a priestess, ride in a horse-drawn wagon through the countryside, just as the goddess Nerthus rode in a covered wagon drawn by cattle attended by a male priest nine hundred years earlier. The time of the procession is marked by peace and feasting. Gunnar bravely leads the horse through a blizzard, but when he requires rest and enters the wagon, Freyr attacks him. As they wrestle, Gunnar vows to return to King Ólaf 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 Freyr to be the father, saying: *uar ok uedratta blid ok allir blutir suo aruænir at beuaü madr munde sligt*, “the weather looked balmy and everything gave such hope of a good season that no man could have done such a thing.”³⁵ Here too, good harvests are attributed to the god.

³⁵ As cited by North, *ibid.*, p. 24.

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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. The Latin and Norse narratives describing the ritual processions of Nerthus and Freyr show no direct signs of literary borrowing from one another, and the authors could not have known the Dejbjerg wagon from Jylland, Denmark (1st century BC) or the Oseberg wagon (834 AD), both of which are believed to have served a ritual purpose. Whether the story in *Gunnars þáttur helmings* was factually true or not is unimportant. What matters most here, according to Terry Gunnell, is that people believed it to have some foundation in reality. Thus, it appears “to have firm roots in oral tradition, just like the numerous local legends recorded in Sweden and Denmark (including Dejbjerg) telling of golden wagons hidden in lakes that the Swedish folklorist Bengt af Klintberg (1998) has compiled.”³⁶ At the very least, this tale provides evidence that people in the early fourteenth century accepted the idea that religious processions conveying effigies of heathen gods through the countryside were still taking place during the reign of Ólaf Tryggvasson.³⁷

The wintertime procession of Freyr's idol may be related to the *hieros gamos* of Freyr and Gerd described in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*. While Freyr is the god of harvests who once carried a sword which shines like the sun, his wife, the giantess Gerd, is often interpreted as the frozen earth, initially unreceptive to his penetrating and fertilizing warmth. The phrases *myrket er úti*, “it is dark outside” (st. 10) and *long er nótt*, “one night is long” (st. 42), can hardly apply to the summer months in Scandinavia when the days are long and the nights barely existent.³⁸ The poem's movement from a civilized, male, inside space to a wild, female, outside space, represented by *Gerð* (literally “field”), who is separated from the world by a ring of fire, also contains “a strong element of the processional”; its action link a central place inhabited by gods to a sacred space on the periphery, which may have had a basis in fifth- or sixth century reality when sacrificial practices in Sweden appear to have been transitioning from outdoor spaces with close connections to female deities (cp. *Völuspá* 33 and *Grímnismál* 7) to the indoor spaces of the male ruler.³⁹ The action begins with Freyr enthroned on Hlidskjalf and ends with an agreement for him to meet his bride in “the wood Barri.” As Gunnell demonstrates, a wide range of Yuletide pairing games and mock-marriage traditions, often with elements of the processional, are found all over Scandinavia.⁴⁰ 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. In Scandinavia, mock-marriages and bridal figures were long associated with both the winter and the summer solstices.⁴¹ In the costumed traditions of the Northern nations, we frequently find pairs of

³⁶ “Blótyðjur, Goðar, Mimi, Incest and Wagons,” in *Norse Mythology—Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Pernille Hermann, et al, 2017, p. 125-126.

³⁷ Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (1995), p. 54.

³⁸ Gunnell, *ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁹ Gunnell (2017), *ibid.* p. 127.

⁴⁰ Gunnell (1995), *ibid.*, 133-135. For examples, see Chapter IV. The Frau Holle Legends.

⁴¹ Gunnell (1995), *ibid.*, pp. 135-140.

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actors, one of each sex. Thus the emphasis on gender in these accounts is probably significant.

Nerthus is most often identified as one of the Vanir. It has long been recognized that the name *Nerthus* is an etymon of *Njörðr*, the most senior of the named Vanir gods, and father of Freyr and Freyja.⁴² Grimm himself noted that the name Nerthus was identical to the later Old Norse name *Njörðr*, an “identity as obvious as that of Freyr to Freyja.”⁴³ According to John McKinnell (2005), the development would be “Nerthus > *Njarðuz (breaking) > *Njörðuz (u-mutation) > *Njörðr* (synscope).”⁴⁴ Much has been made of this apparent gender gap. Over the years, scholars have suggested that the deity described by Tacitus was actually male or had changed gender over time, reflecting the reduction in the status of women between the times of Tacitus and Saxo.⁴⁵ The competing theory that Nerthus was a hermaphrodite received some attention when it was first proposed, but is now generally rejected. Such interpretations, however, are unwarranted since a number of wooden idols recovered from the peat mosses of Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein demonstrate that the deity could be of either sex. As we shall see, 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 worshiped as siblings and marital partners.⁴⁶ The difference of sex between *Njörd* and Nerthus is less of a problem than some imagine, for among the gods most commonly associated with such processions, we find other gender-reflexive names such as Freyr and Freyja, who are siblings; as well as *Fjörgynr* and *Fjörgynn*, which designate the earth-goddess and the father of Odin's wife respectively.⁴⁷ Thus, it is not inconceivable that *Njörd* and Nerthus represent siblings or a couple.⁴⁸ This is all the more likely since in *Lokasenna* 36, *Njörd* is said to have fathered Freyr with his own sister, who remains unnamed in the fragmentary accounts left for study.⁴⁹ Nerthus' temple *in 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 name derived from Greek mythology. Therefore, it may be significant that Tacitus chose the word *Oceanus* rather than Latin *mare* to describe her island home.⁵⁰ Despite the great age separating these sources, Richard North observes:

“The formal relationship between two divine names, between *Nerthus* of the Angli and *Njörðr* of the Norsemen, is evidence of a cultural continuity in this period sufficient to permit further comparison between Tacitus' *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.”⁵¹

⁴² At least as far back as Jacob Grimm in *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. 13.

⁴³ *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. 10.

⁴⁴ McKinnell, *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁵ McKinnell, *ibid.*, p. 52, citing North pp. 1-25.

⁴⁶ McKinnell *ibid.*, p. 55

⁴⁷ *Fjörgynn*, a masculine name, attested in *Lokasenna* 26 and *Gylfaginning* 9; *Fjörgynr*, a feminine name, attested in *Hárbarðsljóð* 56, *Völuspá* 56, etc. See John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, (2001), pp. 117-118.

⁴⁸ Orton, *ibid.*, p. 304.

⁴⁹ *Við systur þinni gaztu slikan mög ok er-a þó vánu verr.*

⁵⁰ North, *ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵¹ North, *ibid.*, p. 11.

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Besides associating the Earth-Mother with the Ocean in his text, Tacitus describes Nerthus' mode of transportation ambiguously, calling it a *vehiculum*, leaving room for speculation regarding its form.⁵² Some have suggested the wagon was outfitted as a ship. In support of this, the late eddic poem *Solarljóð* contains a curious passage which states that “Odin's wife”, a common kenning for the earth, “rows in earth's ship,” *Óðins kván rær á jarðar skipi* (st. 77), adding that she is “eager after pleasures” and “her sails are hung on the ropes of desire.” Thus, another possible parallel may be found in the description of a protracted ship procession that traveled by land and water from Aachen, the westernmost city in Germany, to the Belgian town of St. Trond (Sint-Truiden), in the year 1133, according to *Gestorum Abbatum Trudonensium* written by Rodulf, the Abbot of St. Trond (c. 1070–1138).⁵³ Hilda Ellis Davidson (1998) summarizes his account:

“It tells how a man from near Aachen got permission to build a ship, which he had put on wheels and had drawn by weavers. They took it to Aachen, Maesdricht (where it was given a mast and sail), Tongres, Borgloon, and finally to Trond. Here the abbot warned the townspeople against it, and the weavers had to guard it day and night, but nonetheless it was welcomed with riotous delight by the townspeople; in the evening half-naked women are said to have rushed to the ship and danced around it. At midnight the dance ended and a great shouting took place, but sadly no words were recorded. This went on for twelve nights, and when more sober citizens wanted to burn the ship, there was such an outcry that it departed unharmed to Louvain, although the gates of the town were closed against it.”⁵⁴

Jacob Grimm, who provided an excerpt of the text in Latin,⁵⁵ notes that despite the earnest objections of the Christian clergy, the secular authorities sanctioned the procession and protected it, that it rested within the authority of several townships whether to grant admission to or refuse the approaching vessel, and that the popular sentiment seemed to be that it would have been considered uncouth not to welcome it and forward it on its way.⁵⁶ The ceremony has a decidedly heathen tone. A large procession of people of both sexes (*utriusque sexus processione*) accompanied the ship along its route. When a reception was demanded for it and refused, a heated argument broke out which could only be settled by open conflict. For this reason, Rodulf calls the ship a Trojan Horse (*Troiani equum*). It was built in the forest of Inda in Ripuaria, a region in western Germany whose chief city was Cologne, by weavers, “which the common folk hold to be wanton and proud above all other handiworkers.” They drew the ship along by ropes tied to their shoulders and prevented the great throng of revelers from coming too close to it, taking oaths and tributes from those who did, suggesting the ship was considered sacred. The abbot's primary objection to the procession was that the vessel, in his opinion, was “the abode of evil spirits” (*malignorum spirituum domicilium*), so that it could justly be called “a ship of Bacchus, Venus, Neptune or Mars.” Rodulf remarks that it was

⁵² M.J. Rudwin, *The Origin of the German Carnival Comedy* (1920), p. 9.

⁵³ *A History of the Abbey of St. Trond*, Book XII. chapters 11-13.

⁵⁴ *The Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 112.

⁵⁵ *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol I., pp. 259-260.

⁵⁶ Printed in full in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Volume 173, edited by Leo Marsicanus, (1854), p. 181-184.

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“strange to me that I was not compelled to offer up a sacrifice to Neptune in front of the boat (*ante navim Neptuno hostias immolare*) as they were accustomed.” He describes droves of scantily clad women with their hair loose, shamelessly dancing around the earth-ship (*terrae navis*). Wherever it stopped, the country folk (*pauper rusticus*) gave joyful shouts, sang songs of triumph, and danced around the vessel. Between moonrise and sunrise crowds of women “leapt from their beds with hair yet disheveled, some half-naked and others clad only in a cloak, and burst impudently in to mingle with those who were dancing around the ship.” Men and women alike, a thousand at any time, celebrated in this manner long into the night —behavior immediately reminiscent of the joyous ship-scenes featured in the Bronze Age petroglyphs. Remarkably, one petroglyph from Norrköping, Östergötland shows such a ship being dragged by four-footed beasts, possibly horses. Grimm wrote that although heathen worship had been “checked and circumscribed” in the region for centuries that some memory of ancient heathen rites must have survived in the memory of the common people there, which is not unlikely since at the time this happened Sweden was not yet fully converted to Christianity; Adam of Bremen had described the heathen temple at Uppsala in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (1073-1076) less than sixty years before; Saxo Grammaticus had not yet penned his *Histories* in Denmark (c. 1185), and Snorri Sturluson had not yet written the *Prose Edda* in Iceland (c. 1220), which clearly demonstrates that heathen lore was still circulating orally in the North at the time. In this context, a guild of weavers constructed a wheeled-ship, which they pulled from town to town in Western Germany and Belgium, causing the rural people to revel. Occurring almost three centuries before the literary tradition of *Das Narrenschiff* (The Ship of Fools) began in 1494, there is no reason to connect the two traditions.



Flora's Ship of Fools
Hendrick G. Pot, 1637

Originating in the heathen era, the land-ship remained a feature of seasonal processions in Northern Europe throughout the Middle Ages. A record of the Lübeck Carnival procession of 1458

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in Schleswig-Holstein reports that sixteen women and eight men were aboard a ship-cart when it accidentally capsized. In Nuremberg, a procession of maskers known as *Schembartlauf*, (analogous to the *Perchtanlauf*) drew a ship-car occupied by revelers from 1475 onward. Traces of such annual processions can still be found in ordinances issued by the town-council of Ulm in Swabia, the seat of the Suevi, dated 1524, 1531 and 1532 prohibiting people from going about with plows or ships on *Fastnacht* (Jan 6th) in disguise, blackening their faces or making themselves otherwise unrecognizable, with a penalty of one gulden.⁵⁷ In the year 1527, however, such lawlessness prevailed and so the council permitted “dancing and drumming and whistling in the streets at night” dressed in *Fastnacht*-disguises and visiting the neighbors— an edict they rescinded in subsequent years.

Prominent scholars such as Hilda Ellis Davidson have long compared Rodulf's account of the Low German ship procession by land to the wagon procession of the Nerthus cult. The theory that the *vehiculum* of Nerthus was a ship-cart finds some support in the fact that her procession set out from a sacred grove located on an island in the ocean. Jacob Grimm, on the other hand, considered the land-ship to be the vehicle of a different Germanic goddess described by Tacitus. In *Germania* chapter 9, the Roman historian states that part of the Suevi sacrificed to Isis. Although he could not ascertain the origin of this “foreign rite”, he believed that her emblem, “fashioned in the form of a light warship, proves that the cult is imported.” Even so, there is no evidence that Isis worship ever extended into Northern Europe. Therefore, it seems probable that the Swabian deity identified as her by Tacitus was a native Germanic goddess. J.B. Rives notes that this was more of a case of mistaken identity than *interpretatio Romana* since Tacitus actually believed the Suevi had adopted foreign rites. Since the cult of Isis was widespread throughout the Roman Empire at the time and promulgated primarily through Roman influence, it is highly unlikely that a Germanic tribe outside of the empire would have adopted it. Consequently, most scholars agree that Tacitus (or more likely his source) identified a native goddess as Isis, because of similar rituals associated with them involving ship processions by land.⁵⁸ When searching for the identity of Isis of the Suevi, it should be noted that the Greco-Egyptian goddess, like the Nordic Freyja, was a sensual fertility goddess who wandered the world weeping in search of her lost husband. In Egypt, Greece and Rome, votaries of Isis pulled a ship as part of a procession in her honor. In the North, Freyja's family, the Vanir were closely associated with ships. Her father Njörd resides in *Noatún*, the “Ship-yard” and her brother Freyr possesses a vessel large enough to transport all the gods equipped for war which could be folded up like a napkin and placed in one's pocket. Its name, *Skíðblaðnir*, means “assembled from pieces of thin wood,” fitting for a cult-ship built for the duration of the festivities.⁵⁹

Moreover, dozens of votive images dating to the second and third centuries AD, mainly from the Netherlands, depict a Low German goddess named Nehalennia often depicted with a boat or holding an oar. She was first attested on twenty-eight inscriptions discovered near Domburg on the island of Walcheren, after a storm eroded sand dunes there in 1645 and again in 1870, exposing the remains of a presumably Roman temple devoted to her. Almost as many more were discovered in the

⁵⁷ Carl Jäger, *Schwäbisches Städtewesen des Mittelalters*, Vol I, p. 525-256.

⁵⁸ Rives, *Germania* p. 162.

⁵⁹ Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (1984), p. 289.

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town of Colijnsplaat on the shore of the Oosterschelde in the early 1970s and two others were found near Cologne, Germany, east of Aachen, the city where the ship procession described by Rodulf of St. Trond commenced. In these images, Nehalennia commonly appears seated, accompanied by a dog, and carrying a basket of apples or baked loaves. While she cannot be convincingly identified with any later Germanic goddesses, her emblems suggest a connection to the Earth-Mother. In some images, she is shown with two other goddesses, associating her with the threefold Matronae of Central Europe. A sea-god sometimes appears on the sides of her altar or separately, carrying a dolphin and armed with a trident like his Greek counterpart Poseidon.



Altar of Nehalennia beside drawing from L.J.F. Janssen's *De Romeinsche Beelden en Gedenksteenen van Zeeland*, 1845

According to Wolfgang Golther (1895), Roman merchants were accustomed to offering sacrifices to the native deities on the coasts where they traded. If a Roman subject were to meet a goddess which seemed familiar to him on a strange shore, he would erect a stone altar to her, employing their common attributes. The local name of the deity was typically inscribed on the monument in Latinized form or else the name of the corresponding Roman god with a Germanic qualifier, for example: *Marti Thingsus*, *Mercurio Channini*, *Herculi Magusano*, etc. The pictorial representation was thus dependent on *interpretatio Romana*, and not wholly convertible back into its Germanic form. Therefore, behind the Roman Nehalennia may stand a native Germanic goddess whose emblem was a ship. Presumably, like the Vanir, she was associated with shipping, trade and commerce.

The Nerthus procession, which ends with a sacrifice in a lake, can further be confirmed by ceremonial objects recovered from bogs and wetlands. The term *xoanon*, used by the fifth century historian Sozomen for the idol seen riding in a cart, is supported by archaeological evidence. The word

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refers to a rough-hewn or barely worked piece of wood, as opposed to the elaborately carved idols of the Classical world, which corresponds conceptually to the Old Norse term for god, *áss*, the singular of —thought to be derived from the Germanic root **ans*, **ansuz*, recorded for Gothic as the Latin plural *Anses* by Jordanes— which has an Old Icelandic homonym meaning "wooden pole or beam." In a tenth century account of Vikings on the Volga river, the Arab diplomat Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who was sent by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir to the court of the Bulghar king, describes a group of wooden poles set up near a harbor consisting of a tall pillar with the face of a man carved in it, surrounded by smaller figures made in the same fashion, representing the family of gods. During his journey of about 4000 km, Ibn Fadlan described the peoples he encountered, devoting about a fifth of his work to the *Rūsiyyah*, Scandinavian traders living on the river banks near the camps of the Volga Bulghars. He writes that as soon as they arrived on shore, his heathen host brought food and an alcoholic beverage to the wooden idols as an offering, before prostrating himself in prayer before them.

A similar arrangement was found around the sacrificial bog (Opfermoor) near Oberdorla, the largest known Iron Age cult site in Central Europe. The bog, which includes a shallow marshy pool, in the municipality of Vogtei, formerly known as Oberdorla in Thuringia, has yielded a rich variety of such idols. The site was a regional cult center from the Hallstatt Period (sixth century BC) to the Migration Age (fifth century AD). Among the idols recovered are rough-hewn poles or posts, sometimes equipped with a phallus; several forked sticks with a head carved on the top, all female; broad planks cut in silhouette with blank faces representing males with rectangular bodies and females with slanted cuts indicating breasts, broad hips and vulvas, similar to the male and female figures found along the Wittemoor Timber Trackway in Berne, Lower Saxony; and finally one carved from a squared piece of wood with an inclined head and a base. An impressive pair of idols made from elongated branches was also recovered at Braak near Hamburg dated from the second to third centuries BC. The male, which stands ten feet tall, and the slightly shorter female both have emphasized sexual organs.

The famous male idol from Broddenbjerg, fashioned from a forked tree limb, measures about 40 inches tall and was set on a cairn built at the center of a bog, where it was surrounded by offerings. A rough face was carved on one end to give it a human appearance. The natural form of the wood lent itself to depicting a man with an erection, akin to the idol of Fricco in the eleventh century temple at Uppsala described by Adam of Bremen. A rough-hewn birch idol, measuring approximately 1.05m tall, recovered in late June 1946 at Rebild skovhuse in Denmark was wrapped in textiles which may have clothed her. Dubbed the "Freyja of Rebild," the gender of the figure is clearly indicated by an emphasized bosom and vulva scored with a deep cut in the trunk. A more detailed wooden idol of undetermined gender and age, since destroyed, was found in 1859 at Possendorf near Weimar in Thuringia with up-raised arms, including carved hands and fingers, attached to the wooden body. Such finds provide valuable clues to religious practices in Northern Europe during the heathen era.

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The Broddenbjerg Freyr



The Freyja of Rebild

In support of Tacitus' account of the Nerthus procession, several ceremonial wagons have also been recovered. Two Iron Age wagons from the first century BC, one with an alder wood stool probably used as a seat, were found near Dejbjerg in Jutland, Denmark, along with two more partially recovered from Danish cremation graves, conceivably may have been used for ritual processions.⁶⁰ Richly ornamented with bronze fittings in the typical La Tène style, indicating Celtic manufacture, both of the wagons from Dejbjerg are four-wheeled vehicles with a relatively low compartment, approximately 1.8 meters in length with a central pole extending another 1.8 meters in front. The elaborate bronze details suggest they were reserved for ceremonial use, while their circumstances indicate a ritual deposit. Found in a bog, both wagons were carefully dismantled and surrounded by an enclosure of stakes as if they had been deliberately sacrificed.⁶¹

In 1904, a remarkable archaeological discovery was unearthed at Oseberg, Norway, consisting of a well-preserved Viking ship that contained the remains of two women along with a rich array of grave goods. Widely celebrated as perhaps the finest find of the Viking Age, the magnificent ship was completely covered by a mound or *haugr*, measuring approximately 40m wide and 6.5m high. Constructed from oak planks, the vessel measured 21.4m long by 5.1m wide and contained 15 pairs of oar holes, meaning up to thirty men could row the ship. Its stern and ringed bow were carved with elaborate engravings. While seaworthy, the ship was relatively light and thus thought to have been used for coastal voyages only. Dendrochronological analysis of timbers in the grave mound dates the

⁶⁰ McKinnell, *ibid.*, 52; Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (1993), p. 133.

⁶¹ Rives, *ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

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burial to the Autumn of 834 AD. The damp conditions within the mound allowed the ship and its contents to survive nearly intact for over a thousand years.

The remains of two women were placed in a specially built wooden tent located at the center of the mound. One of the women, aged 75-80 years old, wore a luxurious red dress made of wool woven with a lozenge twill pattern and a fine white linen veil with a gauze weave. The second woman, in her early fifties, wore a plainer blue wool dress with a wool veil, possibly indicating stratification in their social status. The connection between the two remains unclear. Some believe the women were related, others have interpreted them as Queen Asa and her handmaiden. It is plausible that the two represent a noble woman interred with her sacrificed slave. An analysis of the find by archaeologist Anne Stine Ingstad connects the two to a heathen cult and interprets the older woman as a *völva* or priestess. Other skeletal remains found on the ship included thirteen horses, two oxen, and four dogs, perhaps intended to accompany or assist the women on their voyage to the underworld.

The details of the Oseberg find largely agree with an account of just such a burial witnessed by Ibn Fadlan, who attended the funeral of a Scandinavian chieftain along the Volga river in Russia around 921 AD. According to him, the man's slaves were asked by the family of the deceased whether any of them would accompany their master to paradise, and so the chieftain was joined in death by a willing slave girl, who was ritually slain for the occasion. During the ceremony, animal sacrifices were also cut up and thrown onto the ship. Ibn Fadlan says that, after outfitting the corpse in luxury items,

“They carried him inside the pavilion on the ship and laid him to rest on the quilt, propping him up with cushions. Then they brought alcohol, fruit and herbs and placed them beside him. Next they brought bread, meat and onions, which they cast in front of him, a dog, which they cut in two and which they threw onto the ship, and all of his weaponry, which they placed beside him. They then brought two mounts, made them gallop until they began to sweat, cut them up into pieces and threw the flesh onto the ship. They next fetched two cows, which they also cut up into pieces and threw on board, and a cock and a hen, which they slaughtered and cast onto it.”⁶²

The Oseberg grave had been opened in antiquity and so no objects of precious metals, if ever present, were found. Still a remarkable collection of wooden and textile artifacts were left behind. The furniture included a richly carved wooden wagon, four elaborately decorated sleighs, three beds as well as a number of wooden chests. A bedpost shows one of the few examples of what has been dubbed the *valknut* symbol. Five zoomorphic posts fashioned from maple wood, all of similar size and carved with animal heads, were laid in the grave. The exact function of these posts remains unknown. They each contain slots for handles so that they could be carried, suggesting they may have had some sort of religious significance. More mundane items, such as agricultural and household implements were also recovered. These include farming equipment, looms and needlework tools, regular household items such as vats, barrels, a hand grinder, and crockery, as well as the so-called "Buddha bucket" named for two brass and cloisonné enamel ornaments on the handle in the shape of a seated figure with crossed legs. Although often compared to depictions of the Buddha in the lotus

⁶² James Montgomery translation.

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posture, a more immediate connection exists between these two ornaments and Insular or Hiberno-Saxon illuminations of the Gospels from the British Isles such the Book of Durrow.



The Oseberg Ship and Wagon

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The Oseberg burial is one of the few sources of Viking age textiles, and the wooden wagon is the only complete Viking age cart found to date. The elaborately carved four-wheeled wagon appears to have been incapable of turning corners, and thus likely was limited to ceremonial use. The cart is composed of parts made from different types of wood. The frame is made of oak and its two shafts of ash, joined by a short iron chain. The cart was probably pulled by two horses, one on each side of the shafts. It could be disassembled for transport. The back of the cart is decorated with cats, calling to mind the team that drew Freyja's chariot. The front end of the cart shows a man lying on his back surrounded by serpents, possibly representing Gunnar in the snakepit. These familiar scenes may have had significance to the ceremony. A tapestry buried with the Oseberg wagon, of which several fragments survive, offers further insight. It is one of a series of textile remains recovered from the Oseberg ship, including woolen garments, imported silks, rolled rugs, decorative tapestries and curtains, which vary widely in respect to quality, weaving techniques and materials. Among them we find imported silk cloth, embroideries using silk thread, tablet bands and woolen fabrics for a variety of uses.

The burial chamber was constructed immediately behind the ship's mast. Inside, the two women were laid under a wood-frame tent on a bed made up with linen. Long, narrow, woven tapestries, perhaps hung as a frieze on the wall, lined the chamber. The main fragment of one such tapestry depicts a religious procession involving three wagons. The lead wagon holds two figures; at least one is female. The other two wagons are covered, and it has been plausibly suggested that they held holy objects of some kind. Of this pictorial representation of a heathen religious procession,

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Terry Gunnell (1995) 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, and the line of celebrants who have a stance similar to that often depicted on the Bronze Age petroglyphs. (*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). 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.”⁶³

The Oseberg tapestry, as it is known, is embroidered with mythological and battle scenes, stylistically similar to the Bayeux tapestry. One of its fragments features a scene showing two black birds in flight, hovering above a rider on horseback. Anne Stine Ingstad, who discovered the remains of a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in 1960, has interpreted these birds as Huginn and Muninn flying over an image of Odin. Another fragment of the tapestry contains a group of boar-headed women bearing shields, which may represent valkyries.⁶⁴ Another depicts a female figure clad as a bird of prey, standing in front of what has been described as a temple. Yet another contains an image of an armed man, clad in an animal skin, approaching a figure wearing a horned helmet and carrying a pair of crossed spears, like those on the Torslunda helmet plates. A horned figure also heads the wagon procession. While his helmet appears somewhat indistinct in the surviving fragment, both Björn Haugen and Mary Storm, who did the actual reconstruction of the tapestry under his direction, assured that the motif was “that of a man wearing a helmet with horns.”⁶⁵ One can speculate that this figure represents a god, as its scale suggests no ordinary mortal. It is by far the largest figure depicted on the tapestry. Due to the fantastic nature of the imagery, it is probable that at least some its scenes have a mythological context.⁶⁶ Many of the postures, helmets and equipment depicted occur elsewhere in Germanic material from the Bronze Age petroglyphs forward, once again, pointing to the continuation of an almost homogeneous religious tradition with very ancient roots.⁶⁷ As we have seen, the ritual wagon procession was a well-established part of that tradition in northern Europe during the heathen period. This practice may be seen as continuing into the Christian era when statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints were carried around to bless the fields.⁶⁸

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶⁴ Gunnell, *ibid.*, p. 61, states “Regarding the boar-headed figures, it is worth noting that Tacitus writes of the Aestii (from the area around the coast of Lithuania) as bearing ‘boar figures’, or according to Mattingly, ‘boar masks,’ (*insigne superstitionis formas aprorum gestant*) as an emblem of the mother of the gods whom they worshipped.”

⁶⁵ Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (1970), p. 157, note to page 45.

⁶⁶ Gunnell, *ibid.*, 63. See also E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (1964), p. 57.

⁶⁷ Gunnell, *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ Davidson, *ibid.*

Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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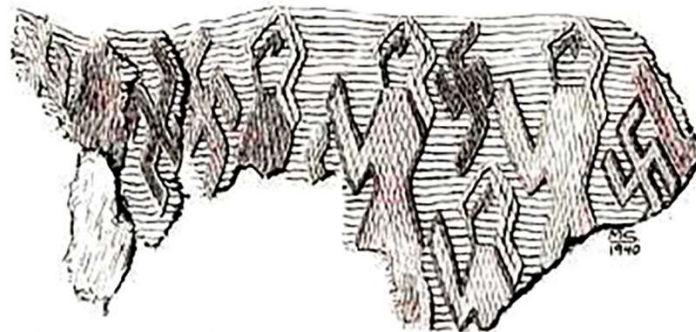
Scenes from the Oseberg Tapestry c. 834 AD

Drawings by Mary Storm, 1940

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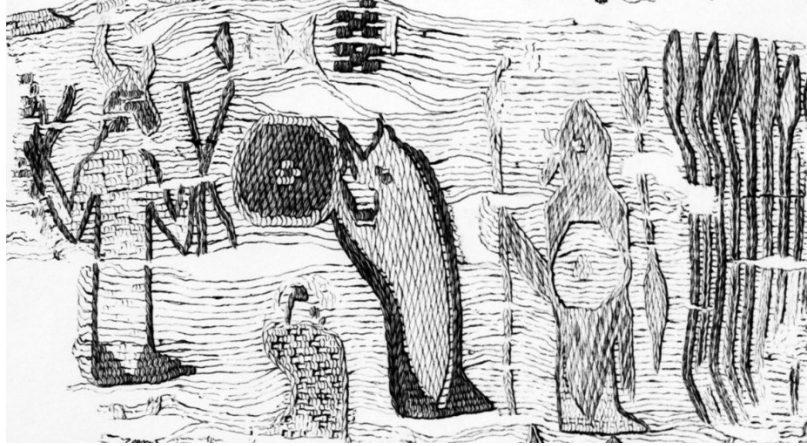
Ritual Wagon Procession



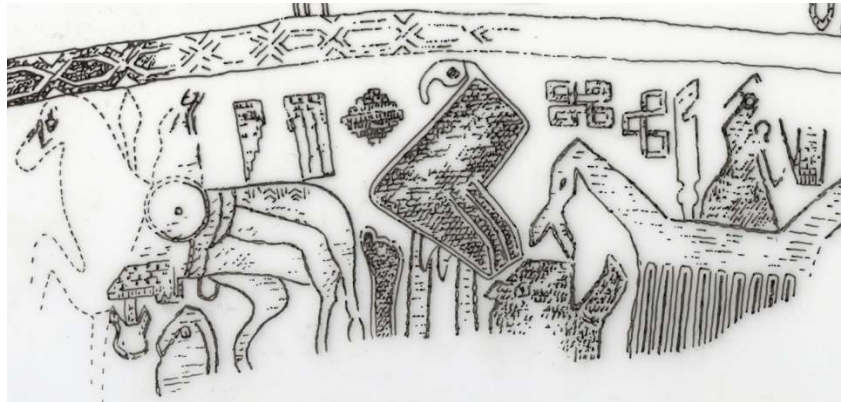
Dancing Women

Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

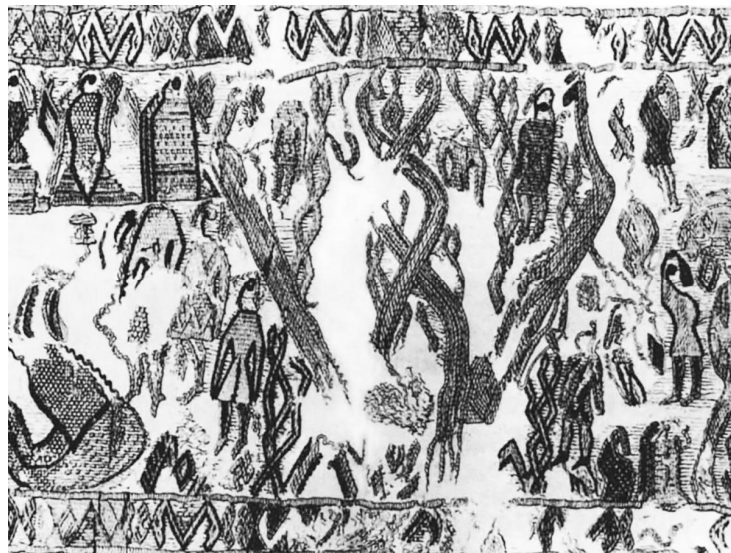
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Horned Warrior and Boar-headed Woman



Bird-headed Woman



Sacrificial Tree

Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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Outline of Horned Man Leading the Procession



Costumed Procession led by Horned Man (top row, left)
Detail of the Oseberg Tapestry c. 834 AD