



Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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Frigg of the Vanir

The conclusion that Frigg is the Germanic Earth Mother now seems inescapable. As Odin is called the All-father, Frigg has the appearance of an All-mother. The poet Egill Skallagrímsson refers to the gods collectively as “Frigg’s progeny.”¹ She is the wife of the highest god, and mother of at least two other ruling gods. As Frigg, the beloved, she is the wife of Odin and mother of Baldur. As Jörd, she is the wife of Odin and mother to Thor.

There is no question that the Germanic gods are conceived of as an extended family. Writing in the 6th century of the Franks, Gregory of Tours [II, 29] places these words on the lips of a heathen king:

“It was at the command of our gods that all things were created and came forth, and it is plain that your God [Jehovah] has no power and, what is more, he is proven not to belong to the family of the gods.”

Similarly, in the *Rusila*, Ibn Fadhlán describes a collection of related idols honored by the Rus along the Volga river in the 10th century:

§ 85. “When the ships come to this mooring place, everybody goes ashore with bread, meat, onions, milk and intoxicating drink and betakes himself to a long upright piece of wood that has a face like a man’s and is surrounded by little figures, behind

¹ *Egil’s Saga*, ch. 79 ; *Complete Sagas of the Icelanders* I, p. 151

which are long stakes in the ground. The Rus prostrates himself before the big carving and says, "O my Lord, I have come from a far land and have with me such and such a number of girls and such and such a number of sabres", and he proceeds to enumerate all his other wares. Then he says, "I have brought you these gifts," and lays down what he has brought with him.

...If he has difficulty selling his wares and his stay is prolonged, he will return with a gift a second or third time. If he has still further difficulty, he will bring a gift to all the little idols and ask their intercession, saying, "***These are the wives of our Lord and his daughters and sons.***" And he addresses each idol in turn, asking intercession and praying humbly."

The content of the eddic poem *Lokasenna* assures us that the gods are interrelated, and together form an extended family unit, united by bonds of blood and marriage. Such bonds are mentioned throughout the poem. This family structure is also reflected in later accounts of heathen temples, where we often find groupings of related deities. In the temple at Uppsala, Odin, Thor and Friggo are worshipped together. In *Fljótsdæla Saga* 26, we find Frigg, Thor, Frey and Freyr worshipped in one place. The saga describes a heathen temple with a finely wrought gate, surrounded by wells at Bersabrunnr ('Bersi's wells'):

Þá gengur Helgi inn í hofið og sér að þar er ljóst svo að hvergi ber skugga á. Þar var allt altjaldað. Setið var þar á báða bekki. Þar glóaði allt í gulli og silfri. Þeir blígðu augum og buðu ekki þeim er komnir voru. Í öndvegi á hinn óaðra bekk sátu þeir í samsæti Freyr og Þór.

"Then Helgi went inside the temple and saw that it was so light that there were no shadows. All the walls were covered with hangings. There were figures seated on both benches. Everything was shining with gold and silver. They stared with their eyes and did not invite the newcomers. In the high seat on the lower bench Frey and Thor sat together in the same seat."

It continues:

Þar sátu þær Frigg og Freyja. Hann mælti þessi hin sömu orð við þær sem áður. Kvaðst hann mundu veita þeim blíðu ef þær vildu veita betur honum.

"Frigg and Freyja were sitting there. He said the same words to them as before would serve them graciously if they would grant him their favor."

—John Porter, *The Complete Saga of the Icelanders*, Vol. IV, pp. 432-433

The appearance of related gods together such as that of Odin and Frigg in the History of Lombards, of Wodan, Baldur, Folla and Frija in the *Second Merseburg Charm*, as well as Wotan and Donar named in the *Saxon Baptismal vow*, and the gathering of Wotan, Thor and Friggo in the temple at Uppsala all find counterparts in the

later Old Norse pantheon, demonstrating that a personalized Germanic pantheon had been developed and was widely accepted in all Germanic areas by the ninth or tenth century.²

The poet of *Lokasenna* makes good use of these relationships. There Loki interrupts a gathering of the gods, feasting at Aegir's. He has not been invited. Neither Baldur nor Thor are present when Loki enters the banquet. He asserts his right to a seat, claiming kinship through blood-brotherhood with Odin. Odin honors this obligation by asking his son Vidar to provide "the wolf's father" a seat. Loki is the father of the Fenris wolf, who is fated to swallow Odin. Vidar will avenge him. Most scholars recognize the subtle humor in this. But what fewer seem to realize is that this sets the tone for the rest of the poem.

While we no longer see Jörd and Frigg as the same entity, the poet appears to be aware of their identity. This is revealed in part by an indirect comparison between Thor and Balder. When Frigg, who sees everything but speaks nothing of it, cautions Loki against speaking of times past, he accuses her of infidelity. Frigg responds:

*"Veiztu, ef ek inni ættak
Ægis höllum i
Baldri líkan bur,
út þú né kvæmir
frá ása sonum,
ok væri þá at þér vreiðum vegit."*

27. "Know that if I had,
at Ægir's halls,
a son like Baldur,
you would not go out from
the Æsir's sons: you would have
been fiercely assailed."

Next, Freyja leaps to Frigg's defense, and then Njörd stands up for his daughter. Loki continues around the table, throwing insults in the gods' faces, accusing each of shameful misconduct. Throughout he accentuates their relationships, revealing that this is more than a gathering of gods. It is a family gathering.

At last Thor enters the hall. Early on, Frigg had said that if she had a son like Baldur in the hall, Loki would be confronted, and Thor in fact fulfills this prophecy. Upon his entry, Loki exclaims:

"Earth's offspring has made his entrance now."

Thor, of course, is the son of Earth, while Balder is the son of Frigg. Like Baldur, Thor rides to the hall and, as Frigg predicts, challenges the acid-tongued Loki and puts him to flight. Thus "earth's son" accomplishes what Frigg's son would have, had he not been dead. If Jörd and Frigg are one, then Thor is the closest thing to a son "like Baldur" she has. This appears to be a subtle indication that the poet and his audience were conscious of Frigg and Jörd's identity.

² Murdoch and Read, *ibid*, p. 83.

As we have seen, Earth is the wife of Odin, the daughter of Night, and sister of Day. Obviously she is well connected in the world of the gods. And our knowledge of her genealogy doesn't end there. The sources provide us additional names, such as Jörd's brother Aud. Thus it may be fruitful to see how exactly they fit into the family tree.

With this in mind, let's consider a few verses near the end of the poem *Völuspá*. There, just before Earth sinks into the sea, Earth's many names are repeated in rapid succession, one after another:

*Þá kømr inn mæri
mögr Hlöðynjar,
gengr Óðins sonr
við ulf vega,
drepr hann af móði
Miðgarðs véur,
- munu halir allir
heimstöð ryðja -
gengr fet nú
Fjörgynjar burr
neppr frá naðri
níðs ókvíðnum.*

Then comes the mighty
son of Hlödyn:
(Odin's son goes
to fight with the monster);
Midgárd's Veor in his rage
will slay the worm.
Nine feet will go
Fiörgyn's son,
bowed by the serpent,
who feared no foe.
All men will
forsake their homes.

*Sól tér sortna,
sígr fold í mar,
hverfa af himni
heiðar stjörnur,
geisar eimi
við aldrnara,
leikr hár hiti
við himin sjálfan.*

The sun darkens,
earth sinks in the ocean,
the bright stars,

fall from heaven
fire's breath assails
the all-nourishing tree,
towering fire plays
against heaven itself.

Eddic scholar, Ursula Dronke believes this repetition is intentional. In her commentary on *Völuspá* 53/2, she states:

"The emphasis upon Þórr's mother, the earth, is deliberate here, as men are leaving that *heimstöð* forever. Hlöðyn is probably to be identified with Hludana, a Germanic (?earth-)goddess of the Lower Rhine, named in five inscriptions from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Fjörgynn's name is a (rare) *heiti* for earth"

Now, let us return to a verse in *Völuspá* cited earlier. If indeed Hlin and Frigg are names of the earth, then we can include the following verse in this repetition of earth's various names.

*Þá kømr Hlínar
harmr annarr fram,
er Óðinn ferr
við úlfvega,
en bani Belja
bjartr at Surti,
þá mun Friggjar
falla angan.*

Then comes Hlin's
second grief to pass,
when Odin goes
to fight the Wolf
and Beli's bright bane (Frey)
against Surt.
Then Frigg's
angan shall fall.

Before earth sinks into the sea, she is invoked as Hlöðyn, Miðgarðr, Fjörgyn, and Fold. If earth is truly "Odin's wife," then the names Hlin and Frigg can be added to this list. When earth rises anew from the sea in *Völuspá* 56, she is called Jörð, as she was known in her youth. The last verse quoted above may contain an additional allusion to that event. The verse refers to the events of Ragnarök. It informs us that when Odin faces Fenrir, and Frey faces Surt, Frigg's "*angan*" will fall. The word "*angan*" is typically understood figuratively and taken to mean "delight" or "joy" based on its literal meaning "sweet scent." Modern scholars and translators, almost to a person, narrowly interpret the phrase *Friggjar angan* as "Frigg's husband," i.e. her "delight." Hlin's first grief is understood to mean the death of her son Baldur; her second grief is thus the death of her husband, Odin. So why is Frey mentioned in the verse at all?

Once we recognize Hlin and Frigg as alternate names of the Earth, "*angan*" literally blossoms with new meaning. The word *angan* is etymologically related to the word *angr* meaning "grief" or "sorrow," making the expression *Friggjar angan* a near doublet of *Hlínar harmr*. It may also carry additional meaning. "To fall," figuratively, means to die, as when the poet cited earlier speaks of a dying man "falling to Hlin." Hlin represents the Earth. Since Hlin is an alternate name for Frigg, when Odin goes to meet the wolf and Frey goes to meet Surt, the "sweet scent" of Earth itself will die. To further emphasize this point, a secondary meaning of the word *angan* is "spines" or "prickles"

and is used specifically to refer to “plant fiber.”³ Thus the death of *Friggjar angan* also signifies the conflagration of earth’s fragrant flowers and trees, filling the air with the reek of smoke. *Völuspá* confirms this by saying that flames will play against the vault of heaven and the burnt crust of the earth will sink into the sea. The verse adds that Frey, the harvest god, falls before Surt’s sword, here called the “bane of branches” (*sviga lævi*, *Völuspá* 50), a kenning for fire. As the god of crops, Frey’s fruits produce the “sweet scent” of the Earth, which will die when earth is set ablaze. As we have seen, the name Fricco, a masculine form of the name Frigg, is used to designate the god Frey in the temple at Uppsala by Adam of Bremen in the 11th century, suggesting a closer link between the two. We have already seen that *angan* can refer to Odin; as Frigg’s lover, he is her “sweet scent.” Might it refer to Frey as well? Certainly the context suggests it may, or else his presence in the verse is superfluous.

The Eddaic poem *Lokasenna* informs us that Frey was the product of an incestuous union. He is the child of Njörd and his unnamed sister. In verse 36 of that poem, Loki says:

"*Hættu nú, Njörðr,
haf þú á hófi þik,
munk-a ek því leynd lengr:
við systur þinni
gæztu slíkan mög,
ok er-a þó vánu verr.*"

36. Cease now, Niörd!
in bounds contain thyself;
I will no longer keep it secret:
it was with your sister
you had such a son;
hardly worse than thyself.

Ynglingasaga ch. 4 confirms this relationship, stating that “while Njörd lived with the Vanir he had his sister as wife, because that was the custom among them. Their children were Frey and Freyja. But among the Aesir it was forbidden to marry so close akin.” Thus, when Njörd came to live among the Aesir, logic dictates that he could no longer keep his sister as his wife. Unfortunately, Njörd’s sister remains unnamed in our fragmentary sources. Scholars who have hazarded to guess, most often identify the unnamed sister of Njörd as Nerthus, the earth-mother since the two names are etymologically related, and a wide range of evidence supports the veneration of a male-female divine pair associated with fertility across northern Europe. While we cannot determine the name of Njörd’s sister, we do discover a brother of the earth-goddess whose name may prove relevant to our investigation.

In *Gylfaginning* 10, Snorri informs us that Jörd’s brother was named Aud, a name that means ‘wealth.’ As a mythic personality, Aud is likewise unknown. However, in a proverb from *Vatsdaela Saga* 47, a wealthy man is said to be “as rich as Njörd.”

³ Cleasby/Vigfusson Dictionary, s.v. *angan*.

Pá mælti Þróttólfr: “Eigi skiptir þat högum til, at Húnroðr, góðr drengr, skal vera félauss orðinn ok hlotit þat mest af okkr, en þræll hans, Skúmr, skal orðinn auðigr sem Njörðr.

“Then Throttolf said, “It is not as it should be that Hunrod, a good man, should have become penniless, mostly on our account, while his slave Skum grows as rich as Njörd.”

Snorri informs us that Njörd rules over the motion of the wind and moderates the sea and fire. Men pray to him for good voyages and fishing. He is so rich and wealthy that he can grant wealth of land or possessions to those that pray to him.⁴ In addition, the Codex Regius manuscript of Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* 23,⁵ contains a variant. There the name *Auðr* reads *Uðr*, a proper name equivalent to *Unnr*, “wave.”⁶ Thus the name of Jörd’s brother may be interpreted as “wealth” or “wave”, names which apply equally as well to Njörd as a god of rich coastal harbors. Thus, although the name of Njörd’s sister is lost to us, we have strong circumstantial evidence that Njörd was known as Jörd’s brother. Since we have discovered that Jörd is also a byname of Frigg, we can surmise that Njörd and Frigg are siblings. At once this explains the relationship between the names Njörd and Nerthus. Indeed they are a pair, as many scholars have theorized, not unlike their own children, Frey and Freyja. Frigg is not only the mother of Baldur and Thor, but also the mother of Frey and Freyja. She is truly the mother of the gods. The revelation of these relationships allows us to plumb the depths of the *Völuspá* verse in question, bringing out additional aspects of the meaning previously overlooked.

As the beloved son of Frigg and her brother Njörd, Frey can also be designated *Friggjar angan*, Frigg’s ‘sweet scent’, invoking the tender image of a mother and child. The same imagery is invoked in the first line of the verse, which alludes to “Hlin’s first grief”, the death of her son Baldur. Thus, in this verse, Frigg’s second grief entails not only the loss of her husband, but the loss of another son, as well as her own fragrant venture, and ultimately of her own life. Frigg loses everything dear to her. Even her most powerful son, Thor — *Miðgarðs véur*— will be powerless to protect her. Her own name Hlin, which means “protectress” is thus used ironically, since she cannot protect those she loves anymore than they can save her from sinking beneath the waves, once the fires of Ragnarök have been lit. At last, the poet’s brilliance in the selection of a single word is brought to light. This verse is one of *Völuspá*’s most significant and most tragic.

If Frigg is the sister of Njörd, and the mother of Frey and Freyja, another episode in *Lokasenna* becomes deeper and more comic. In that poem, after Loki exchanges barbs with Odin, Frigg intervenes. Both invoke the earth-goddess immediately before Frigg speaks. Odin reminds Loki that once he once *fyr jörð nedan*, “down below the earth,” acting as a milkmaid. Loki retorts that Odin went *yfir verþjóð* (cp. *Verland, Hárbarðsljóð* 56), over the world of men acting as a *völva*. Frigg advises Loki that their fate in bygone days should never be spoken of. She threatens him saying he wouldn’t be speaking like this if she had a son like Baldur in the hall. When Loki lashes out, admitting that he is the reason Frigg no longer “sees Baldur riding to his halls,” Freyja rises to her defense.

⁴ *Hann ræðr fyrir göngu vinds ok stillir sjá ok eld. Á hann skal heita til sæfara ok til veiða. er svá auðigr ok fésæll at hann má gefa þeim auð landa eða lausaffjár er á hannheita till þess.* Source: <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/gg/ggrpar23.html> (last viewed 2/29/08).

⁵ <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/gg/ggrnot01.html#10> (last viewed 2/29/08)

⁶ Cleasby/Vigfusson Dictionary, s.v. Uðr; Egilsson’s *Lexicon Poeticum* s.v. Uðr

Freyja echoes Frigg's words in verse 29, stating that Frigg knows all fate, but remains silent regarding it. When Loki attacks Freyja, her father Njörd rises to her aid. Frigg, Freyja and Njörd appear to act like a family unit: Frigg comes to her husband's defense, Freyja comes to her mother's, and Njörd to his daughter's. At the beginning of the exchange, Loki mentions the son of Odin and Frigg; while, at the end, Loki mentions the son of Frigg and Njörd. Freyja, the daughter of Frigg and Njörd is placed directly between them. Loki blasts the three of them with charges of sexual misconduct of the kind common among the Vanir. First he accuses Frigg of sleeping with her husband's brothers (26):

*"Þegi þú, Frigg,
þú ert Fjörgyns mæ
ok hefr æ vergjörn verit,
er þá Véa ok Vilja
léztu þér, Viðris kvæn,
báða i baðm of tekít."*

"Shut up Frigg,
You are Fjörgynn's girl
and have ever been eager for men
when you, Vidrir's (Odin's) wife,
embraced both Vili and Ve
in your bosom."

Next, Loki accuses Freyja of having taken "every Aesir and Alfar gathered here" into her bed. This must include her father and her brother. Loki underscores this point by stating that when the gods discovered Freyja "beside her brother," she farted. Njörd defends his children stating that there is no harm in a woman finding herself a man, and counterattacks calling Loki *ragr* for having borne children. Loki reminds Njörd that he was sent to the Aesir as a hostage, and that giantesses' known as Hymir's daughters once used his mouth as a urine-trough. He ends by revealing that Njörd begot his son with his own sister.

Knowing what we do of the Vanir's sexual mores, the naming of Frigg's father may be more than a simple genealogical notice. From the context, it probably implies an insult. It may be meant to imply that she too had sexual relations with him. A heathen audience would have been expected to know their relationship, and need not have it spelled out for them— as some insist must be done before they can accept it. This would have been implicit if Frigg's father was one of Odin's brothers. As we have seen, in *Gylfaginning* 10, Snorri informs us that Jörd's father was named Annar, while in *Gylfaginning* 9, he said that Jörd was the daughter and the wife of Odin. We cannot now know who Annar or Fjörgynn was, but as Odin was named *Priði*, "the third," *Annar*, "the second" or "another," would be an appropriate name for one of his two brothers. Because Loki directly says that Frigg slept with both of Odin's brothers, this seems all the more likely. He is saying the same thing in different ways in both halves of the verse. Annar and Fjörgynn are not recorded as names of Odin, least of all by Snorri, demonstrating that he did not make this connection.

Other poets seem to be aware of the family relationship between Frigg and Njörd, Frey and Freyja. In the late Eddaic poem *Solarljóð* 77-79, "Odin's wife" is once again associated with Njörd and his children.

*Óðins kvæn
rær á jarðar skipi,*

*móðug á munað;
segjum hennar*

*verðr síð hlaðit,
þeim er á þráreipum þruma.
77. Odin's wife
rows in earth's ship,*

eager after pleasures;
her sails are
reefed late, which on
on the ropes of desire are hung.

*Arfi, faðir
einn þér ráðit hefi
ok þeir Sólkötlu synir
hjartar horn,
þat er ór haugi bar
inn vitri Vígdvalinn.*

78. Son! I thy father
and Solkatla's sons
have alone obtained for thee
that horn of hart,
which from the gravemound bore
the wise Vígdvalin.

*Hér eru rúnar,
sem ristit hafu
Njarðar dætr níu:
Böðveig hin elzta
ok Kreppvör hin yngsta
ok þeira systir sjau.*

79. Here are runes
which have engraven
Niörd's daughters nine,
Radvör the eldest,
and the youngest Kreppvör,
and their seven sisters.

Here Odin's wife is said to sail in "earth's ship", perhaps a reference to the religious processions that made their way through the heathen countryside in wagons or ships. In the next two verses, we find allusions to Frey and Freyja, followed by a direct reference to Njörd. The allusion to Frey is not immediately apparent, until we remember that Frey is said to have killed the giant Beli with a "hart's horn" (*hjartarhorni*, *Gylfaginning* 37). Frey is also said to have once possessed a sword, which he gave away in exchange for Gerd (*Lokasenna* 42). He will regret this loss when he goes to meet Surt. It is entirely possible that Surt wields the same sword that Frey gave away. Sigurd Nordal writes: "It would have been pointless if Freyr had merely given his sword to Skirnir, his page. Of course it came into giant hands, and the tale becomes more impressive of all if it is precisely Freyr's own sword which Surt bears.⁷ Ursula Dronke concurs.⁸ *Völuspá* informs us that Surt yields *sviga lævi*, "the bane of branches," which shines like *sól valtíva*, "the sun of the Val-god."⁹ If Frey is the *val-tíva* in question, the term "hart's horn" here may be nothing more than a poetic paraphrase for a sword.

Solarljóð 77 says that the "hart's horn" was borne out of a gravemound by Vígdvalin. In *Thiðreks Saga af Bern*, ch. 40, we hear a similar tale of a dwarf named Alfrekkur producing a sword from a gravemound to give to a king (cp. ch 16). In possible connection with this, the late *Fornaldarsaga* concerning Heidrun and Högni, informs us that Dvalin (cp. Vígdvalinn) and Alfrigg (cp. Alfrekkur) were two of the dwarves that forged a necklace for Freyja, Njörd's daughter.

Next the poet invokes Njörd's nine daughters. In skaldic poetry, the phrase "Njörd's daughter" is a kenning for Freyja. No other daughters of Njörd are known outside of this poem. Besides Freyja, they are eight in number, the same number that surround Menglad in *Fjölsvinnsmál*. There Menglad, "the necklace lover" (cp. Freyja's

⁷ Nordal, *ibid*, pp. 103-104.

⁸ *Poetic Edda*, vol. II, p. 147

⁹ *valtíva* can be either singular or plural; Nordal, *ibid*, p. 104.

necklace, *Brisinga-men*) sits surrounded by her eight handmaidens, one of whom is Eir, the goddess of healing (38). That Menglad is a goddess herself is made clear in verses 36, 39 and 40 of that poem: any woman who climbs her hill will be cured, even if she has a year's sickness upon her, and her maidens will protect those who worship at her holy altar. That she is one of the highest goddesses is indicated by the subordinate position that Eir, the goddess of healing, takes up at her feet. We can rightly suspect that she was either the youngest or the oldest daughter of Njörd, here called Kreppvör and Radvör, neither of which are among the known names of Freyja. As it stands, Odin's wife, the earth, and Njörd are mentioned here in close proximity, just as they are in *Lokasenna*.

That Freyja is Frigg's daughter makes good sense. Frigg is the foremost goddess; Freyja is a close second. The scholars have sometimes "confused and conflated" them, suggesting that they were one figure.¹⁰ There is no question that Frigg and Freyja are depicted in similar fashion. Both goddesses are said to own a falcon costume. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Loki borrows Frigg's falcon-guise to journey to the giant Geirrod. In the poem *Þrymskviða*, he borrows Freyja's to fly to the giant Thyrn regarding the loss of Thor's hammer. There is an obvious similarity in the names of their spouses. Freyja is known as *Oðs mey* (Od's maiden) in *Völuspá* 25 and elsewhere, causing several leading scholars to conclude that Freya was Odin's wife.¹¹ In support of this, both Frigg and Freyja seem to share a similar attitude toward Odin. Like Frigg in the prose introduction to *Grimnismál* and Frea, the wife of Godan, in the 7th century account of how the *Lombards* (Longobards, 'long-beards') acquired their name, Freyja is set at odds with Óðin in the late *fornaldarsaga Sörla þattur*. There Odin, a human king, objects to his mistress prostituting herself to four dwarf-smiths in exchange for a necklace and so sends his man Loki to steal it. Similarly, in Saxo's *Danish History* Book 1, Frigg with the aid of some "smiths" strips gold and bracelets from a statue of Odin incurring his wrath. Margaret Clunies Ross suggests that the latter narratives are "essentially the same."¹² Scholars cite these non-eddaic accounts most often as evidence for their identity. Yet, for all of this, Snorri keeps the both Frigg and Freyja, and their husbands, Óðinn and Oðr respectively, distinct from one another. In Eddaic poetry, both goddesses are often named or alluded to in the same poem. In *Oddrunargratr* 9, they are invoked together:

"May the kind powers Frigg and Freyja and the other gods
Help you as you have saved me from dangerous distress." ¹³

Certainly the Icelandic poets were able to and did distinguish them from one another. Evidence from other regions is simply too spotty to determine if this was the case elsewhere as well. Thus, rather than explain their similarity as identity or origin from a single source, it is just as plausible to conclude that their similarities derive from their relationship as mother and daughter. Among her many sons, Freyja appears to be Frigg's only daughter, making their relationship that much more special.

Frigg herself is probably best interpreted as a Vanir deity. Hilda Ellis Davidson, writing in *Gods and Myths of the Northern Europe* (1964) observes:

¹⁰ Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, p. 121

¹¹ Naström, *ibid*, p. 81, among others. See above.

¹² Clunies Ross, *ibid*, p. 98.

¹³ Näsström, *ibid*, p. 80.

“There is little doubt that Frigg and Freyja are closely connected. As weeping mother, the goddess associated with childbirth and linked to the benevolent Mothers, Frigg appears to have her roots in the Vanir cult.”¹⁴

Like the Vanir, Frigg is prescient. In *Lokasenna* 29, she is said to know all fates, but never speaks of them. (*örlög Frigg, .. at öll viti, þótt hon sjalfgi segi.*). In practical terms, the earth holds its secrets in silence. In *Germania* 7, Tacitus notes that the Germanic people “believe that there is something holy, and an element of the prophetic in women, hence they neither scorn their advice nor ignore their predictions.”¹⁵ In the Eddaic poems *Helgakviða Hundingsbani I* and *Fafnismál*, birds also display this gift. Tacitus affirms the age of this concept in *Germania* 10, speaking of the “widespread practice” among the Germans “of seeking an answer from the call or flight of birds.” In prehistoric Germanic iconography, bird-headed women sometimes appear in ritual settings, perhaps representing divine figures. In this light, we should reconsider Frigg and Freyja’s falcon-guises. Three swan-maidens appear in *Völundarkviða* 1, whose description evokes images of the norns, the weavers of fate.

*Meyjar flugu sunnan
myrkvið í gögnum,
Alvitr unga,
örlög drýgja;
þær á sævarströnd
settusk at hvílask
drósir suðrænar,
dýrt lín spunnu.*

“Maidens flew from the south
through Mirkwood, foreign beings,
young, their *fate* to fulfill.
They by the lake’s shore
settled to rest themselves,
southern damsels,
precious linen they spun.”¹⁶

Like the norns, these “southern damsels,” three in number, set about spinning. In the *Prose Edda*, we learn that Urd’s well lies to the south,¹⁷ and that swans swim in its waters.¹⁸ These swan-maidens are driven by fate. Like Frigg and Freyja, they are able to transform into birds by means of a feather garment. They rush to meet their husbands who are called “elf princes,” *alfa ljóði* and *vísi alfa*, later in the poem. The elves are

¹⁴ p. 123.

¹⁵ A.R. Birley tr.

¹⁶ *Völundarkviða*.1: Ursula Dronke tr.

¹⁷ *Skáldskaparmál* 65 in a verse by Eilif Gudrunarson: “He [Christ] is said to have his throne in the south, at Weird’s well.” A. Faulkes tr.

¹⁸ *Gylfaginning* 16.

closely associated with the gods. *Grímnismál* 5 says that the Van-god Freyr was given Alfheim as a tooth-gift, making him a ruler there.



Among the gods, the gift of prophecy seems to be especially associated with the Vanir. In *Þyrmskviða* 15, Heimdall is said to know the future, like "all the wise Vanir" (*Þá kvað þat Heimdallr, hvítastr ása, vissi hann vel fram sem vanir aðrir*). In *Völuspá* 24, the Vanir conquer the Aesir during the war between them through *víg-spa*. Despite many unclear translations over the years, we can still arrive at the meaning of this rare word if we look at its component parts. The Cleasby-Vigfusson Dictionary of Old Icelandic defines *víg-spá* as "war-spells" or "war news", but that definition can be further refined if we take *spá* in its common sense as meaning "to prophecy, foretell" and *víg-* as "a fight, battle". By employing *víg-spá*, the Vanir use the power of prophecy in battle to conquer the more powerful Aesir.

*Fleygði Óðinn
ok í folk of skaut,
þat var enn folkvíg
fyrst í heimi;
brotinn var borðveggr
borgar ása,
knáttu vanir vígspá
völlu sporna.*

Odin cast (his spear),
And shot into the folk:
that was the first
folk-war in the world.
Broken was the boardwall
of the Aesir's burgh.
The Vanir, with battle-prophecy,
marched over the plains.

The identification of Jörd and Frigg provides us a natural explanation of why the Aesir could not defeat the Vanir in war. They need not have been numerous. The Vanir represent powerful forces in the world: earth and sea, as well as the fertility and fecundity of the land and the loin. In terms of simple symbolism, the earth (Frigg-Jörd) weds the sea (Njörd). Together, they produce fertility (Frey and Freyja). In turn, the earth (Frigg-Jörd) marries the sky (Odin), producing the thunderbolt (Thor). This is not to reduce the gods to simple personifications of nature, but only to show one level of symbolism inherent in a mythology very much concerned with the cycles of nature.

Frigg and Freyja's relationship as mother and daughter naturally explains their overlapping functions and why they are so frequently conflated by scholars. Their apparent identity was perhaps intentionally fostered by heathen skalds who understood and juxtaposed this relationship in poems such as *Lokasenna* and *Solarljóð*. This identification not only allows us to better understand and appreciate the well-chosen words of the ancient skalds, but also allows us to more clearly identify a continuous thread of evidence for the existence of a single Germanic earth-mother, running throughout the Germanic historical record.

The connection of this ancient symbol with the "Mother of the Gods," further supports the conclusion that Frigg, the mother of the most powerful Germanic gods, was herself a Van, a daughter of one of Odin's brothers. As Odin's wife, she is the mother of his sons: Thor, Baldur and Hödur. As former wife and sister of Njörd, she is the mother of his children: Frey and Freyja. Odin is the "All-father," Frigg is the "All-Mother." In effect, Frigg has two husbands: her lawful husband and her brother both of whom father children by her. Her children all rank among the highest gods.

So is it really surprising that in the earliest record of Germanic divinities, we find a close association between the Mother of the Gods and the boar, an iconic symbol of both Frey and Freyja? In *Germania* 45, Tacitus speaks of another northern European tribe:

“The Aestii, whose rites and fashions are those of the Suebi, although their language is closer to the British. They worship the mother of the gods, and wear images of the boar as an emblem of her cult; it is this, instead of the arms and protection of mortals that renders the goddess’ votary safe, even amidst enemies. The use of iron weapons is rare, but that of cudgels common. They cultivate grain and other crops more patiently than one might expect from the indolence typical of Germani. But they also search over the sea and are the only ones in the world to gather amber in the shallows and on the shore itself.”¹⁹

The boar is closely associated with the Vanir cult. Frey owns the golden boar Gullinbursti, forged for him by dwarves. Snorri says: “it could run across sky and sea by night and by day faster than any horse, and it never got so dark from night or in worlds of darkness that it was not bright enough wherever it went, there was so much light shed from its bristles.”²⁰ Frey rides it “in front of Odin’s sons’ pyre”²¹ at Baldur’s funeral. The boar is also called Slidrugtanni. Freyja also rides on a boar in the poem *Hyndluljóð*. There the boar is called Hildsvini, “battle-swine” and was made for her by the dwarves Dainn and Nabbi (v. 7). The witch Hyndla perceives that the boar is actually her lover Ottar (Oðr) transformed, “on the way of the slain.” (v. 6, 7, 8). Freyja herself confirms that they are on the way to Valhalla (v. 1) One of Freyja’s names is Sýr, Sow, so her riding her lover transformed into a boar has overt sexual connotations. Overall, the pig seems to be a genuine Germanic fertility symbol. As such, it may also have been a symbol of reincarnation, the renewal of life itself. Perhaps *Grimnismál* 18 alludes to this.

There we learn that the heroes of Valhalla, the singular *einherjar*, are fed on the meat of an ever-renewing boar, Saehrimnir (*Grimnismál*. 18). That poem calls it “the best of meats,” and says “It shall ever feed the Einherjar.” Snorri explains that “there will never be such a large number in Val-hall that the meat of the boar called Saehrimnir will not be sufficient for them. It is cooked each day and whole again by evening.” (*Gylfaginning* 38). There is little doubt that this was one intended meaning of the boar-feast. In *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 19, the boar is said to feed the entire company of gods. Similarly the Einherjar drink the ever-flowing milk of the goat, Heidrun (v. 25). Hyndla, speaking of Freyja, likens Freyja her love for Ottar as ever running “out at night, like Heidrun among the he-goats” (v. 48). So again, we have Freyja being equated with the food-source in Valhalla, this time the goat. Like the renewing boar, the mythology also knew a renewing pair of he-goats, Tanngristr and Tanntgnostr. They can be slain and eaten so long as their bones are laid carefully back in their skin. These Thor hallows with his hammer, and the bucks spring back to life, whole again. No such ritual is prescribed for Saehrimnir.

According to *Grimnismál* 14, Freyja takes half of the slain warriors into her hall Folkvang, while Odin takes the remainder into Valhalla. Not only is her lover represented in the shape of a boar, among her many epithets we find Sýr, which means sow. Clearly, there is a close connection between the Vanir gods, war, and the symbol of the boar. In the *Nafnapular*, among the names of swine, we find the names *val-glitnir* (slaughter-shiner) and *val-bassi* (slaughter-bear), as well as *vigrir* (war-like) and *vaningi* (Van-

¹⁹ J.B. Rives, Tacitus *Germania*, p. 96.

²⁰ *Skáldskaparmál* 35, Anthony Faulkes tr.

²¹ A verse from *Húsdrapa* by Ulf Uggason, quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* 8, Faulkes tr.

child).²² In Anglo-Saxon art, boars are frequently depicted on helmets and other battle-gear. Pigs are not only fertile, producing many young, but are fierce fighters which bear tusks, which are likened to weapons. They are also rooting animals which symbolically connects them with the plow, making them appropriate symbols of the Vanir, who once defeated the powerful Aesir in war (*Völuspá* 23-24). The mystery of the boar symbol, so prevalent throughout early Germanic culture, begins to make sense in this light. As a symbol it is intimately connected with the Vanir cult.

Other poems consciously play on this imagery. In *Lokasenna* 34, Loki says:

*Þegi þú, Njörðr,
þú vart austr heðan
gíls of sendr at goðum;
Hymis meyjar
höfðu þik at hlandtrogi
ok þér i munn migu.*

Shut up, Njörd!
you were sent from the east
as a hostage to gods:
Hymir's daughters
used you as a urine-trough,
and pissed in your mouth.

Hymir is a giant who lives beyond the Elivogar, the icy-waves at the end of the world. Thor contends with him in fishing, and steals a giant brewing kettle big enough for the gods from him. In *Þórsdrápa*, Thor must wade through a raging river. It proves to be caused by a giantess, urinating into the stream. Thor throws a rock at her saying “a river must be stopped at its source.” Hymir’s daughters are undoubtedly giantesses of the same kind.²³ As a river meets the sea at its mouth, Loki says that Hymir’s daughters flow into Njörd’s mouth. Without an understanding of the natural forces behind this extravagant poetic conceit, the comic insult would be meaningless.

In contrast to the happy union of Njörd and Jörd, Njörd and Skadi’s marriage represents the unhappy union of the earth and the sea. He cannot stand the howling of wolves, while she cannot stand the shrieking of sea-birds. Jörd seems to be a goddess of arable lands and forests, while Skadi is inherently a giantess of wild mountain tracts. Like Völund and his brothers, she hunts and skis. She is known as the snow-shoe goddess. Njörd’s marriage to her may be seen as a reflex of his marriage to his sister, the earth. Odin’s marriage to Jörd leaves Njörd without a partner. As a replacement for Jörd, the myths present him with Skadi, an austere mountain giantess. The Old Norse poets were fond of this kinds of comical clashes of opposites. She first came to Asgard to avenge the death of her father Thjazi. As a condition of her peace-making, she would be allowed to chose a husband from among the gods, and be made to laugh. Skadi chooses a husband from among the gods by their feet alone. She desires Baldur and so chooses the whitest, loveliest feet. She chooses Njörd. Njörd does not choose his bride. He is the one who

²² All translations by Anthony Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 164.

²³ Dronke, Lindow and others agree.

wears the veil and the gods like bridesmaids beside him. The same theme is repeated in *Þrymskviða*. There Thor must don a wedding gown and go as a bride to the giant Thrym in order to retrieve his hammer.

But it also had its serious side. During the Van-As war, Odin and Njörd seem to have exchanged partners once again, Frigg siding with her *ætt* the Vanir, and Skadi divorcing Njörd in favor of Odin. *Grímnismál* 11 refers to Skadi as “the bride of gods” (*skír brúðr goða*) and Snorri preserves a story in which she marries Odin and lives with him in “Mannheim.” This probably coincides with the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. Saxo (History, Book 3) says that after Baldur’s death, Odin was removed from his throne and sent into exile for the space of ten years. During that time, Ull sat upon the throne of Asgard. Like Skadi, Ull is a hunter and skier, again like the elf-princes, Völund, Egil and Slagfinn, Skadi lives in Thrymsheim (Thrym’s home) Ull dwells in Ydalir, the Yew-ales. He carries a bow.

These natural associations were probably already established by 100 AD. As we have seen, the name Nerthus (*Terra mater*) is an etymon of Njörd.²⁴ Nerthus may be linked to *Oceanus* in the same manner; Tacitus speaks of her sacred grove on an island located in the Ocean (*in insula Oceani*). In Latin, Oceanus can be understood as a proper name.²⁵ Gudbrandr Vigfusson remarks that the old name of Zealand:

“Sælund, better Selund, ...is said to be derived not from Sæ-lund (i. e. Sea-grove), but from the root *sal-*, the *-und* being inflexive, cp. '*Insula Oceani*,' Tacitus *Germania*, ch. 40, which is not improbably a kind of translation of Selund.”²⁶

In Snorri’s *Edda*, Sælund is an island dislodged from Sweden by Gefjun, the goddess with a plough, and placed in the ocean as an island. The spot from which it came is now Lake Mälaren in Sweden. Might this myth once have referred to the island of Nerthus, who is Mother Earth? In late German folklore, Frau Holle, whom we know to be Odin’s wife, is depicted as a goddess with not only a wagon, but a plough as well.²⁷ Frigg’s home in Fensalir may also imply that she was thought to be immersed in water,²⁸ even as Midgard (Earth) is conceived of as an island in the Ocean. Perhaps connected to this, Frigg is most often identified with the goddess Saga, who is said to drink mead “every day” with Odin from golden goblets in her hall *Sökkvabekkr*, the “Sunken-bench” or “Sunken-brook”²⁹ while “cool waves resound above” (*Grímnismál* 7). Icelandic scholar Sigurd Nordal observes: “both names have the same meaning, ‘hall in the deep (of the sea),’ and Saga is doubtless only one of Frigg’s names.”³⁰ Ursula Dronke believes that Fensalir is “a subterranean water-palace like the submarine *Sökkvabekkr*.” She suggests that a *fen*, ‘quagmire,’ might imply great pools leading down into marshes, such as those into which Egill cast his treasure and his slaughtered slaves as an offering to

²⁴ See Part I of this essay.

²⁵ North, *ibid*, p. 23.

²⁶ s.v. *Sae-lund*, p. 618.

²⁷ See Part 1 of this article.

²⁸ Näsström, *ibid*, p. 110.

²⁹ *Bekkr* means either ‘bench’ or ‘brook’; Richard North, *Haustlög*, p. 38.

³⁰ *Völuspá* edited by Sigurður Nordal, translated by B.S. Benedikz and John McKinnell (Durham and St. Andrew Medieval texts, 1978), p. 69.

Odin.³¹ Similarly at the conclusion of Nerthus' circuit, the idol was washed in a lake and the slaves that accompanied her drowned. Similarly, Frau Holle often emerges from lakes, wells, and ponds, which are considered sacred to her. Perhaps such pools were seen as an entryway into her hall.

We find this close mythological connection between the earth and sea repeated elsewhere in Old Norse mythology. In the beginning, the earth emerges from the sea. In *Völuspá* 4, Odin and his brothers— "Bur's sons"— lift her up out of the sea. Ursula Dronke interprets the poem *Skirnismál* as a late reflection of this mytheme. She writes:

"We know that the emergence of earth from the ocean was a well established pattern in Norse mythology. ...Gerð is the only partner I know in a 'sacred marriage', who represents an earth that still resides in the sea when the sky woos her. ...It is no doubt the poet's representation of the god's bride as the rich girl from the sea that has prevented general acceptance of the 'sacred marriage' of Sky and Earth as the basic plot of *Skirnismál*."³²

This well may be an ancient cosmic legend.³³ We find evidence of it throughout the Indo-European Diaspora. In Greek mythology, evidence suggests that Hera, besides being the "wife and sister of Zeus," was a cyclical earth-goddess.³⁴ The three principal sources of knowledge regarding her early worship are the *Illiad* and her two earliest sanctuaries at Argos and on Samos off the Turkish coast. As in Tacitus' account of the Nerthus cult in northern Europe, the sacred bath of the goddess or of her cult statue apparently was an important element in her worship. That a majority of her sanctuaries are placed in fertile marshy places (Kroton, Metapontum and Samos), often near the confluence of waters, supports this. Several myths associate her with rivers and streams. Hera herself is said to come from such a place:

"I go on my way to the bourne of Earth, to see Okeanos, from whom the gods arose, and Mother Tethys. In their distant hall they nourished me and cared for me in childhood." (*Illiad* 14.200-301).³⁵

Both Hera and Okeanos (Ocean) share the epithet "origin of all things."³⁶ Like Nerthus (*Terra Mater*), Hera's archaic association was primarily with cattle. Her most common Homeric epithet *βοώπις* is translated "cow-faced"³⁷ or more traditionally as "cow-eyed." Zeus himself once gave her a white heifer. To hide an illicit affair from Hera, Zeus was forced to transform his lover, Io, into such a creature. When Hera asked for it as a gift, Zeus granted her wish. She accepted not knowing that the heifer was actually Io, a mortal and one of her own priestesses. Io is the daughter of Inachus, a river god, who judges a dispute between Hera and Poseidon over the possession of the island of Argos.

³¹ Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, Vol. II, p. 140.

³² Dronke, *Poetic Edda* Vol II, pp. 396-397.

³³ Dronke, *ibid*, p. 396, who uses the 6th century story by Pherecydes of Zas and Chthonie as an analog.

³⁴ *The Transformation of Hera: A Study in Ritual, Hero and the Goddess in the Illiad* by Joan V. O'Brien, (Rowman and Littlefield, 1993) p. 4.

³⁵ Joan O'Brien tr.

³⁶ *Illiad* 14.201 Okeanos is *genesis pantessi*; and Hera is *genethlê pantôn* (Alcaeus 129) cited from O'Brien.

³⁷ West, *ibid*, p. 185.

Because modern scholars question the names and boundaries that Greek and Roman authors assigned to the people of northern Europe, a couple of observations by Herodotus regarding the Scythians may be relevant here.³⁸ Herodotus reports (7, 64) "The Persians call all the Scythians Sakai," a group many scholars have identified as the ancestors of the Saxons. According to him (4, 59), the Scythians of northeastern Europe, "propitiate by worship ...Hestia most of all, then Zeus and the Earth, supposing that Earth is the wife of Zeus, and after these Apollo, and Aphrodite Urania, and Heracles, and Ares. Of these all the Scythians have the worship established, and the so-called royal Scythians sacrifice also to Poseidon."³⁹ Like Nerthus and Njörd in the Germanic realm, Earth and Sea in Greek myth also appear to be intimately connected. In Greek sources, Poseidon and Hera vie for the possession of the island Argos, where she ultimately establishes her cult. In the Illiad, Hera and Poseidon conspire together to thwart the will of Zeus (Book 8). Like Njörd, Poseidon and Oceanus are powerful sea-gods with a close relationship to the earth.



³⁸ Peter Wells, *Beyond Celts, Germans, and Scythians*, (Duckworth Publishers, 2001).

³⁹ My gratitude to Carla O'Harris for pointing this out.