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The Goddess: Myths of the Great Mother

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The Goddess: Myths of the Great Mother

Description

The Goddess is all around us: Her face is reflected in the burgeoning new growth of every ensuing spring; her power is evident in the miracle of conception and childbirth and in the newborn's cry as it searches for the nurturing breast; we glimpse her in the alluring beauty of youth, in the incredible power of sexual attraction, in the affection of family gatherings, and in the gentle caring of loved ones as they leave the mortal world. The Goddess is with us in the everyday miracles of life, growth, and death which always have surrounded us and always will, and this ubiquity speaks to the enduring presence and changing masks of the universal power people have always recognized in their lives. Such power is the Goddess, at least in part, and through its workings we may occasionally catch a glimpse of the divine.

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"Chapter IV: The Battle Lust of the Northern Goddess," is available by clicking the download button above.

THE GODDESS



THE GODDESS

MYTHS OF THE GREAT MOTHER

Christopher Fee &
David Leeming

REAKTION BOOKS

To our mothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, sisters, aunts and nieces: goddesses all. David sees the faces of the Goddess in Pam, Margaret, Juliet, Julia, Morgan, Brooklyn, Emilia and Margaret. Chris traces his devotion to the Goddess to Allison, Emma, Chandler, Emmy Lou, Martha, Betty, Catherine, Sandie, Pat, Bernice, Ann, Carmen, Charley, Arrielle and Alyssa.

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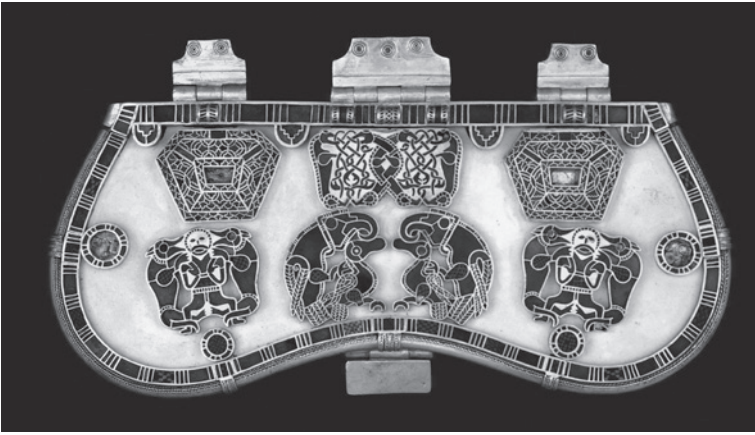
IV

The Battle Lust of the Northern Goddess

Genesis

We are most familiar with the face of the Northern goddess through the visages recognized and recorded by her Scandinavian children. These peoples were illiterate until their conversion to Christianity around the turn of the first millennium, and they are best known to modern readers through records of medieval monks lamenting the scourge of the Vikings. Not all early Scandinavians were part-time pirates and raiders, however, and their culture involved more than shipbuilding, weapon-making and pillaging. It is useful, therefore, to mark this distinction: Scandinavian culture, language and mythology in general we may term 'Norse'; 'Viking', meanwhile, refers to Scandinavian raiders and raiding practices spanning from the late eighth through to the eleventh centuries.

The term 'Viking' most likely derives from *vik*, the Old Norse word for a bay or inlet; to go *i viking*, in the phrase of the day, originally meant signing on for a seasonal raiding adventure during the days of high summer between the planting and the harvesting of the crops at home on the farm. The later, prosperous Vikings would draw more and more followers, eventually developing into 'sea-kings', powerful military and political figures in their own right. These western Vikings conquered or were granted lands in regions from Scandinavia to Sicily, and colonized new territories in Iceland, Greenland and Vinland (North America). Eastern Vikings, known as Rus', founded a principality which ultimately evolved into modern Russia, and they opened eastern trade routes to Constantinople, where



This early 7th-century Anglo-Saxon purse clasp from the famous Sutton Hoo ship burial illustrates the fine workmanship of the period, as well as the importance of animal imagery and complex patterns to the art of the Anglo-Saxons and their Scandinavian cousins.

they formed the personal bodyguard of the Byzantine emperor. The Scottish Isles, the Irish coastal towns and the Isle of Man fell under Viking sway, and a wide swathe of England became the ‘Danelaw’, a region characterized by Norse influences in language and law which are still discernable to this day. Moreover, in 1016 a Scandinavian king, Cnut, ascended to the English throne.

While the reasons for the sudden and widespread success and enduring legacy of these peoples were many and complex, it is hard to deny that their religion and world view played a role, and it is perhaps for such reasons that the fierce face of the Northern battle goddess, especially in her role as a Valkyrie, is especially well remembered today. As ever, however, the goddess may not be easily reduced to a simple characterization, and in her Northern guise one may glimpse manifold attributes concerning fertility, fecundity, sexuality and sorcery, as well as those denoting destruction, despair and death.

The great paradox of Norse mythology is that, on the one hand, it provides us with the richest available view of Northern European pagan beliefs and rituals, while on the other, most of that material comes to us second-hand, as it were, either through the pens of enemies, proselytizers and foreigners, or through the sepia-tinted view of later generations of ancestor-revering Icelanders. Thus, classical

historians, Christian missionaries and monks, and Arab emissaries provide us with shocking tales of barbarous, wild-eyed Northmen, while nationalistic Icelanders regale us with a mythic heritage worthy enough to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with that of Rome or Greece. In the first camp we must include the *Germania* of the Roman historian Tacitus, the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, the histories of Adam of Bremen, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and various eyewitness accounts, such as that of a funeral ritual and concomitant human sacrifice recorded by Ibn Fadlan. In the second camp we find the *Elder* or *Poetic Edda*, a collection of more than thirty poems written down around 1270 but representing much older concepts; the *Landnámabók*, or 'Book of Settlements' of Iceland; various sagas of the Icelanders; and – most notably – the work of Snorri Sturluson, author of the *Prose Edda*.

Written around 1220 as something of a step-by-step guide for poets, the *Prose Edda* is divided into four parts: a prologue; *Gylfaginning*, or the 'Beguiling of Gylfi'; *Skáldskaparmál*; and *Háttatal*. In *Gylfaginning*, Gylfi is a Swedish king who is able to quiz disguised pagan gods about key aspects of Norse mythology. *Skáldskaparmál* comprises a collection of poetic techniques and phrases, while *Háttatal* is a compilation of skaldic verse – that is, of the forms of Norse courtly poetry. Snorri was an important farmer and political figure, and his intrigues against the Norwegian king ended when he was assassinated in his own home in September 1241.

Faces of the Goddess

Perhaps the best-known face of the Northern goddess is worn by the Valkyries, called the *valkyrjar* – 'Choosers of the Slain' – in Old Norse, who are virgin demigoddesses and Odin's emissaries and functionaries upon the field of battle. The Valkyries often give great victories to mighty warriors time and again, only to slay these same warriors and bring them to Valhalla in the end. While selecting daily the cream of the crop of each earthly battle to swell the ranks of the heavenly *einberjar*, the Valkyries also serve mead and pork each evening to Valhalla's chosen warriors, thus emphasizing the traditional role of noble woman as cup-bearer in early Germanic societies. As is

amply illustrated by Wealhtheow, queen of the Danes and mistress within the great hall Heorot in *Beowulf*, the function of the cup-bearer establishes and reinforces rank and privilege among warriors based on attributes of honour and heroic deeds. To be served by the virgin *oskmeyjar*, 'wish girls', of Odin himself is the greatest honour a warrior could receive.

The Valkyries belong to a class of female beings known collectively as the *Disir*, which seems in some sources to include most feminine spirits of any power, from mighty goddesses to guardians of the dead, to the undead spirits of human women. Moreover, the Valkyries have close associations with Freyja, the most potent of the Norse goddesses, who takes a share of the battlefield dead and who counts among her treasures a feather coat which allows her to fly. Freyja may thus be linked with these battle goddesses, and most especially with the swan maidens of the *Völundr/Weland* myth. One may note dryly, however, that Freyja lacks the chastity generally associated with the Valkyries.

The handmaids of the All-father Odin are sometimes said to total nine, other times twelve or thirteen, and then again 29 or even an infinite number. Their names, often evocative of battle and tumult ('Screaming', 'Axe-time') may be more literary than mythic. Though originally clearly superhuman, it seems that some earthly shield maidens and princesses may have swelled the ranks of the Choosers of the Slain. Minor death goddesses such as the Valkyries abound in Indo-European mythic traditions, from India and Iran to Ireland and Iceland. More specifically, the Old English term *waelcyrge*, which has the same etymology as *valkyrie*, generally denotes a kind of witch or fury, possibly revealing the earlier Indo-European female death spirit who is devoid of the late Viking Age trappings that transform this being into the familiar form of the wing-helmeted, breast-plated shield maiden – the Anglo-Saxon records are quite disparaging of such figures, describing them as malevolent and demonic. The description of the Valkyries in the Norse sources, however, is generally more positive, as the death they bring is in a way a rich reward for battlefield valour. The Valkyries thus function as a minor or helping form of a goddess of Fate; indeed, *Gylfaginning* makes it clear that the youngest of the Norns or Fates, Skuld ('Future' or 'What Must Be'), rides forth with the Valkyries on their battlefield missions. The poem

Hákonarmál contains speeches by the Valkyries Göndul, ‘Magical One’, and Skögl, ‘Battle’, which explicate the role of Odin’s shield maidens as battle Fates, and thus perhaps reinforce the association between the Valkyries and the Norns. The clearest reference to the Valkyries as a form of the Fates comes from *Njáls saga*, in which a vision is described which casts the Valkyries as weavers foretelling the carnage of the Battle of Clontarf in Ireland in 1014. The weft and warp threads tied to the loom were wrought of human intestines, while men’s heads served as the weights; the beater was a sword and the shuttle an arrow. The weavers sang a grisly song of the gore and slaughter depicted on the gruesome tapestry woven by the Valkyries.

Primary sources containing references to the Valkyries include most of those texts detailing the entourage of Odin and the afterlife in Valhalla, perhaps most notably *Grímnismál* and *Gylfaginning*, as well as two tenth-century poems in praise of fallen kings: *Eiríksmál*, written after the death of King Eric Bloodaxe at the Battle of Stainmoor in England in 954 CE, and most especially *Hákonarmál*, written in praise of King Hákon the Good after his death at the Battle of Fitjar, on the island of Stord in Norway in 961. The extant versions of *Hákonarmál* include a full transcription in *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson’s history of Norway’s kings. *Hákonarmál*, although longer and much more fully articulated in its treatment of the Valkyrie theme than *Eiríksmál*, seems to owe a substantial debt to the poet who composed the earlier poem; this is perhaps not surprising, as Eric Bloodaxe and Hákon the Good were both sons of Harald Fairhair, and so their lives were bound to invite comparison. Because Odin’s handmaidens choose which warriors will die and when, it is thus natural that they would invite comparison with the Norns.

The number of the Norse Fates is not entirely clear, although they are mentioned and described in a large number of sources. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri first names three individual Norns and then elaborates on the many other varieties of these figures. The three he calls by name are Urd (‘Fate’), Verdandi (‘Present’) and Skuld (‘Future’), and they live near the Well of Urd at the foot of a root of Yggdrasil, the great World Tree of the Norse cosmos. Here they tend to the World Ash and determine the fates of gods, men and all other creatures. The Old Norse word *urd* (*urðr*) is cognate with the Old

English term *wyrd*, and thus is directly related to our modern word 'weird', which gave Shakespeare his 'Weird Sisters', or soothsaying witches, of *Macbeth*.

The Norns manifest a terrible kind of beauty, as they embody both man's hopes and his fears for the future. As Snorri assures us, there are both good and bad Norns, and some are descended from the gods, some from the elves and some from the dwarfs. Some Norns are associated with childbirth, and thus with reproductive, life-giving powers, and the three who are caretakers of Yggdrasil keep the cosmos in balance. The Norns are sometimes also associated with weaving, as is the goddess Frigg, although sometimes the Valkyries are given this task; in any case, the loom is clearly associated with fate, as is, in some cases, the cutting of notches in wood, which may refer both to the mystical practice of rune writing and to the practice of marking time by notching frames and lintels. The Norns, like the Valkyries, may have been related to or even in some measure derived from the *Dísir*, a sort of catch-all term for a number of female demigods, of which some were patrons of the living, others guardians of the dead or battle goddesses. The destructive power of the *norma dómr*, the 'Doom of the Norns', in any case explicitly emphasizes the life-taking power of the Norns, and thus aligns them with destroyer goddesses such as the Valkyries. The Norns have typically been associated with the Fates of the classical world – the Moirai of the Greeks and the Parcae of the Romans – and this probable link may well point to an ancient provenance, as well as to later literary influences.

Aspects of the Great Earth Mother fertility goddess are represented by several deities in the Norse pantheon, including most notably Jord, 'Earth', identified as the mother of Thor and the consort of Odin, as well as the more familiar Frigg, from whom the word Friday arises, who is the mother of Baldr and was the chief consort of Odin by the literary period. The earliest fairly complete information available describing an earth goddess concerns Nerthus, who has been transformed into Njörd by the time of the Viking Age; Sif, the wife of Thor, and Idun, the keeper of the Golden Apples of Youth, both manifest major attributes of fertility goddesses as well. The two most significant goddesses in the surviving literature of Norse mythology are, however, Frigg and Freyja, and there is some

reason to believe that the two may offer different faces of what was once the same deity: *frigg* means 'love', and the Romans equated her with Venus; thus she is associated with the sexuality and pleasure we might be tempted to attribute to Freyja.

Furthermore, while Frigg clearly is designated as the wife of Odin, Freyja is said to have a husband named Od, whose name is cognate with Odin and who often (always, it seems) is away. Moreover, authors including Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson accused Frigg, like Freyja, of the easy virtue and transgressive sexuality one would associate with a fertility goddess. In any case, from earliest times an Earth Mother goddess was worshipped as the mate of a Sky Father god, and Frigg clearly was revered in that regard: indeed, a multitude of place names involving compounds of *frigg* make it clear that her cult was active and widespread. Frigg was also the goddess of the loom, and thus was said to have the ability, like that of the Norns, to discern the fates of men. Frigg would sometimes interfere in the enacting of such fates as well: in disputes with Odin concerning their particular favourite mortals, Frigg was not above resorting to the kind of trickery we might expect of the one-eyed god Odin himself. The most important myths concerning Frigg are those surrounding the death of her son Baldr, however, and thus are best dealt with in a discussion of the conclusion of the Norse mythic cycle. References to Frigg are not uncommon, but for details of her sexual promiscuity, see Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* in his *Heimskringla*. Loki references her incestuous unions with the brothers of Odin in the *Poetic Edda* poem *Lokasenna*, which, along with *Gylfaginning*, is a source of our knowledge that she is a seeress; the *Grímnismál* also contains an example of the disputes of Frigg and Odin.

Stories of the relationship of the goddess to forces of vitality and fecundity, on the other hand, have much to teach us about the starkness of the Norse view of the natural world. For example, the myth of the kidnapping of Idun and the Theft of her Apples of Youth invites a re-examination of the role of the giants as adversaries to the forces of life and vitality embodied by fertility goddesses. The story begins with Loki in the role of boon companion to Odin, but soon we see evidence that the forces of chaos have begun to unravel that relationship. One day Odin, Hoenir and Loki determined to go

forth together in search of adventure, and after a long march they found and slayed an ox and built a fire beneath it in order to roast it. As time passed, however, it became clear that some magical force was keeping the ox from cooking, and the gods were perplexed by this turn of events. From high up above them in a tree a mighty eagle called down to them, informing them that it was he who had bewitched their supper, and offered to undo the charm if he were offered his fair share of the meat. The gods assented to this demand, but when the eagle ripped off most of the best meat from the carcass, Loki became angry and struck at the bird with a staff; the blow stuck where it landed, however, and Loki's hand stuck to the staff; thus by the eagle's magical powers Loki soon found himself a most unwilling passenger on a high-speed, low-level flight across the most rugged terrain the eagle could find. Bashed and battered by every stone and stump in the line of flight, Loki feared that he would soon be broken into bloody bits, and he cried out for mercy. In return for his freedom, Loki was forced to swear an oath to deliver Idun and her Apples of Youth outside of the safety of the domain of the gods; this the Trickster did, and he soon made his way more tenderly back the way he had been brought.

Upon his return to Asgard, Loki found it easy enough to trick Idun into coming with him on a search for the most fabulous apples ever seen. The crafty one told the goddess to bring her own Gold Apples for comparison. At the appointed time and place, he handed her over to the claws of the eagle, who was in fact the giant Thjazi in disguise. The gods soon noticed Idun's absence and lamented her departure, as they began to wither and age. When it was determined that Loki was the last one seen with the missing goddess, the gods threatened him with certain and painful death if he did not undo his mischief; to this Loki tremblingly agreed, with the condition that Freyja lend him her feather cloak, which imparts upon the wearer the guise and flight of a bird of prey. Loki soon winged his way to Thrymheim, Thjazi's home, where he found the giant out and the goddess eager to return to her home; transforming Idun into the semblance of a nut, Loki sped for home as fast as Freyja's wings could take him. He left not a moment too soon, however, as Thjazi almost immediately returned home, realized that Idun was missing, donned

his eagle guise and flew after the retreating Loki. The eagle was much more powerful than the falcon, however, and soon Thjazi had gained much of the distance between them; the gods were watching for Loki's return however, and as he raced over the walls of Asgard they kindled a mighty blaze that Thjazi, in his great rush, was unable to avoid. The feathers burned from his back and the giant plunged to the ground, where the gods quickly dispatched him. Thjazi's daughter Skadi, meanwhile, waited in vain for her father's return.

In this tale, Loki's role as less than trustworthy is emphasized in his deception of the credulous Idun, and in his willingness to betray the life-giving treasure of the gods we see intimations of the ultimate betrayal to come. Shape-shifting is also emphasized in this myth, and likewise provides a cautionary tale about the misuse of such powers. There is an obvious parallel between the Apples of Youth of Idun and those of the classical tradition, and it seems that these traditions may stem from a common source; indeed, a number of close parallels in the Irish tradition support this argument. Apples and nuts have a special place in Irish myth from earliest times as harbingers of eternal life, perhaps because they contain the mysterious power to sprout forth new life; it may be of special interest, then, to note that Snorri added the details of Idun's transformation into a nut from an unidentified source. Apples and nuts have been identified among grave goods and in graven images in the northern world since at least the classical period; apples may have been linked to the otherworld in Anglo-Saxon England, and the Viking Age Oseberg burial ship contained a bucket of apples. The name Idun signifies eternity and continual replenishment, marking the goddess and her apples as symbols of fertility and the life force itself. Hence Thjazi's attempt to capture and contain this life force is not only an attempt to destroy his enemies, the gods, but another reminder of the role of the giants as personifications of the forces of destruction and chaos which constantly threaten to overwhelm the powers of creation and order. The kidnapping of Idun and the Theft of the Apples of Youth ultimately comes from *Haustlög*, a skaldic poem by Thjodolf of Hvin credited by Snorri as his main source in his retelling of the tale in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda*.

In the myth of the Shearing of Sif, Loki takes a more direct role in meddling with one of the goddesses, this time acting entirely of his own volition, and to no discernable end but to wreak havoc. Although the prank that sets the story in motion seems relatively harmless on the surface, the trickster's demonic mirth bespeaks darker deeds to come. Despite the gods receiving mighty weapons through Loki's quest to compensate Sif for her loss, none of these gifts will avail their owners enough to save them in the final battle of Ragnarök. Loki's use of shape-shifting and his duplicitous interpretation of agreements in this myth also flesh out our growing understanding of his volatile character.

Skulking about and acting when no one was aware, Loki sheared the hair of Sif out of pure malice. Once Thor had discovered what Loki had done, he threatened to break every bone in the trickster's body. In the face of Thor's rage, the prankster swore to replace Sif's hair with waves of flowing, growing gold. In order to save himself, Loki convinced the sons of Ivaldi the Dwarf to fashion this hair from gold; they also made Gungnir, Odin's spear, and *Skidbladnir*, the ship of the god Frey, brother of Freyja. The dwarfs gained little but the goodwill of the gods for their labours, but the treasures they produced were magical and beautifully crafted. Loki displayed these masterpieces to Brokk the Dwarf, and the trickster wagered his own head that Brokk's brother Eitri could not fashion three greater treasures. The dwarfs accepted this bet, and Brokk handled the bellows as Eitri fashioned the crafts. Three times Eitri warned Brokk not to dawdle at the bellows, and three times Loki, in the form of a pesky, biting fly, attempted to distract Brokk from his task. The first time, the fly bit Brokk on the arm, disturbing him not at all, and Eitri crafted Gullinbursti, Frey's golden boar; the second time, the fly bit Brokk on the neck, barely annoying him, and Eitri created Draupnir, Odin's Ring of Plenty; the third time, the fly drew blood between Brokk's eyes, causing him to let go of the bellows for an instant, and Eitri produced Mjölknir, Thor's hammer, although the dwarf claimed that his work was nearly ruined, and the handle clearly was a little short.

Brokk and Loki travelled on to Asgard, where the six treasures were placed before the gods, who were called upon to determine the winner of the wager for Loki's head. The golden hair cunningly

crafted by the sons of Ivaldi rooted instantly to Sif's head, restoring her beauty, and Odin and Frey were very pleased with the attributes of Gungnir and *Skidbladnir*, just as they were with those of Draupnir and Gullinbursti. The gods were all captivated, however, with the hammer Mjollnir, which promised to be their greatest protection against the incursions of the Frost Giants; thus Brokk and his brother were declared the winners of the wager, and the dwarf called for Loki's head. The trickster tried to offer a ransom to save his life, but when Brokk dismissed this offer out of hand, Loki sped away upon his magic shoes, traversing the sky and the sea. When the dwarf called upon the Thunder God for justice, Thor himself ran Loki to the ground and delivered him for judgement. Just as Brokk moved to take his winnings by cutting off Loki's head, however, the Sly One argued that the dwarf had a right to the trickster's head, but not to the neck. Disgusted but undeterred by Loki's cleverness, the dwarf acted upon the head that he had won and sewed Loki's lips together, presumably so that the trickster might choke upon his own false words, honeyed though his tongue might be.

While on the surface this myth may seem to relate only tangentially to Sif and her hair, the Shearing of Sif is the catalyst that incites the creation of the great treasures of the gods; more to the point, it seems no coincidence that the greatest treasure produced in the course of this myth, the mightiest weapon of the gods in their struggle against the giants, is the phallic hammer which embodies the power and vitality of the husband of the violated fertility goddess. Sif, 'related by love', is the wife of Thor, and references to her are usually in regard to this relationship; as the veneration of Thor by farmers became more and more widespread, his consort may have developed as a tandem deity, and thus the pair might be seen in the light of the classic pattern of Sky God mated with Earth Goddess. Whether Sif always displayed the fidelity attributed to her name is called into question when the goddess is condemned for unfaithfulness by Loki in *Lokasenna*; then again, the trickster accused most of the goddesses of the same or worse.

Still, the question of how Loki had access to the person of Thor's wife in order to cut her hair while she ostensibly slept is an intriguing one in this context, although to a shape-shifter like Loki, this task

might not prove overly difficult. Loki's relationship with the forces of chaos may be easily inferred by his impish impulse to steal – for no reason except to cause mischief – the golden hair of a goddess of fertility, hair which might well be likened to golden waves of grain. His playful crime has a dark undercurrent, foreshadowing the trickster's ultimate betrayal of the fecundity and life force of the gods in his plot against Baldr, whose own eyelashes are themselves compared by Snorri to sun-bleached grass. While it has been argued that there is no direct evidence of a cult of Sif and that her name in fact refers to a variety of moss, the image of the goddess's hair magically renewed evocatively reflects the annual miracle of the growth of the new grain crop which undulates rhythmically in the gentle breeze of the growing season. Sif's hastily shaved pate conversely might be likened to a field of stubble as the cold winds blow across it after the harvest. Most importantly, it is often overlooked that the gods gained their greatest treasures precisely because of the consequences of this shearing episode, and one wonders if the relationship between a surplus of agricultural plenty and the opportunity to obtain manufactured goods such as those represented by the treasures of the gods was lost on the audience of the myth.

When the giant Hrungrnir grew drunk and boastful in the company of the gods, it was Sif and Freyja he threatened to steal away with him, articulating once more the constant threat of the forces represented by the giants to swallow up the powers of fecundity and sexuality embodied by such goddesses. Snorri provides the fullest telling of the myth concerning Sif's hair in the *Skáldskaparmál* in his *Prose Edda*, in the section in which he details how the gods came to possess their greatest treasures, perhaps thus underscoring the relationship between the potency of fertility and the magic associated with those valuables.

Njörd is another god associated with fertility; moreover, this figure is properly examined in the context of the goddess and changes to her visage. Njörd seems to have been derived from the ancient Germanic goddess Nerthus, the worship of whom is described for us by Tacitus in his *Germania*. Tacitus glossed the name of the goddess as *terra mater*, or Mother Earth, though her cult existed many centuries before the Viking Age; she clearly seems a great goddess fertility

figure related to the family of the Vanir, and the early Germanic name Nerthus is certainly cognate with the later Norse Njörd. (The Vanir is the group of Norse fertility gods; the other pantheon, the Æsir, are war gods. Originally, the two groups had been in conflict, and the Æsir both desired and loathed the forces of fecundity and sexuality wielded by the Vanir.) It also seems highly likely that the cults of Frey and Freyja appropriated many aspects of the rites of their forebears. The goddess Nerthus dwelled in a ritual cart which was covered with a sanctified cloth and kept in a sacred grove upon a holy island; none but the high priest of her cult might look upon or touch the cart, the cloth or the *numen*, 'god-head' (presumably the goddess herself or at least her earthly representation) therein, on pain of death. When the cycle of the year had turned to the moment deemed by the goddess to be most propitious, she would embody her shrine within the cart; her priest would divine her presence and would then hitch the cart to a yoke of cattle and take Nerthus forth to visit her followers, although the goddess would remain sequestered and veiled within her sacred wagon at all times. This peregrination marked a festival of peace, calm and tranquillity: all weapons were put up for the duration of the sacred procession, fighting was strictly forbidden and objects of iron were locked securely away. All who received the goddess feasted and rejoiced in peace and harmony until the goddess returned to her home upon the holy island. Then the cart, the cloth and the goddess herself, if it is to be believed, were washed in the sacred waters surrounding her home; once the temple-wagon had been properly cleansed and reassembled, the slaves who performed these tasks were sacrificed to the goddess by ritual drowning in the same waters. The cult and shrine of Nerthus were thus imbued with a sense of terrible awe and sanctified ignorance, since the uninitiated must not survive the sight of her holiest of holies.

Tacitus places the sanctified homeland of Nerthus upon a holy island in the sea, which has been suggested to have been located in the Baltic. Subsequent followers of related cults seem to have practised their worship upon islands in inland lakes, and in marshy or boggy areas. Like Artemis, Nerthus appears to have been a virgin goddess whose nakedness was never permitted to be violated by profane eyes. Tacitus notes the use of boar masks in similar rites, which may provide

a suggestive link to the association of these animals with both Frey and Freyja; the boar is in any case associated with fecundity among the Germanic peoples and many of their northern neighbours, including the Celts. Ritual carts and related artefacts of the type described by Tacitus and dating to late antiquity have been found in the bogs of Denmark, and a cart and tapestries unearthed in the great Viking Age ship burial at Oseberg may also represent related rites. Tacitus identified the Angles as one of the tribes which worshipped Nerthus, and thus it is possible that this deity travelled to Britain with that tribe; it is certainly true that charms associated with the Earth Mother were common in the Anglo-Saxon world, as were representations of pagan fertility figures such as Sheela-na-gigs. If Njörd is indeed the late Norse manifestation of the earlier Germanic Nerthus, the transformation of Earth Goddess into Sea God may explain in some measure the suggestion that Frey and Freyja were the fruit of an incestuous union: perhaps this mythic understanding stems from the historical fact that the twin fertility god and goddess were ultimately derived from a single source in the form of Nerthus, a much older and perhaps hermaphroditic Germanic fertility figure. The main source of information concerning the cult of Nerthus is Chapter 40 of the *Germania*, but it is noteworthy that a number of archaeological finds contain ritual carts which may somewhat substantiate the literary record. Many of the ritual aspects described by Tacitus seem to have been appropriated into the worship of Frey and Freyja, and some commentators further note that the classical record offers a Syrian counterpoint in the figure and worship of Cybele, also a fertility deity.

Freyja, or 'Lady', came to the Æsir from the Vanir and, as this origin implies, is an archetypal fertility goddess. Freyja is the sister and perhaps lover of Frey, or 'Lord', as well as both the daughter and niece of Njörd, who begat the twin fertility deities upon his own sister. Fertility and sexuality of all kinds is permitted and even promoted among the Vanir, who tap the rich wellspring of life force in any and all of its manifestations; the taboo of incest and the forbidden magic of *seið* (*seiðr*, a fountainhead of feminine natural forces wielded with abandon by the Vanir but considered transgressive by the hyper-masculine Æsir) both represent the power and the mystery of giving free reign to desire. Indeed, it is the very licentiousness of the Vanir,

coupled with the forces released through the embrace of such forbidden pleasures and powers, that the Æsir simultaneously loathe and envy. Freyja is the wife of Od, who is often away, and for whom she weeps tears of red gold; Od is sometimes associated with Odin, but it is true in any case that Freyja is hardly a faithful wife. Freyja and Od have a daughter called Hnoss ('Gem'), who sparkles like a diamond; gemstones take their name from her, and her glittering visage is no surprise as Freyja is herself the most beautiful of the goddesses, as well as the most promiscuous: her rampant sexuality is both representative of and perhaps a catalyst for agrarian fecundity. Love songs are dear to Freyja, and it is wise to solicit her help in romantic affairs.

The darker side of Freyja's character is exemplified by the violent death and destruction of war, which is the opposite side of the coin of unbridled passion that she manifests: uncontrollable sexual urges are not so very different, we are perhaps called upon to understand, from blind bloodlust – it is likewise self-evident that the former are often a trigger for the latter. As an aspect of her role as a war goddess, Freyja claims a share of the battlefield dead, and in this way she manifests a Valkyrie-like attribute; her falcon-feather flying coat further reinforces this association, although it is clear that the hot-blooded Freyja is not cut entirely from the same cloth as Odin's virginal battle goddesses. Odin himself, of course, lusts as much for Freyja's prowess at *seid* as for her voluptuous body. Freyja is, however, without a doubt the object of desire of most males who gaze upon her, including the giants, such as Thrym, Hrungrnir and the mason who built Asgard's wall, all of whom represent the forces of chaos which covet and would steal away the gods' powers of fertility. Freyja's vehicle is a chariot drawn by cats, and her home is Sessrúmnir, 'Roomy-seated', which is situated in Fólkvang, 'Folk-field.' Her mode of transport reminds us again of Nerthus, of course, and some have seen in such replicating earth goddesses a pattern reaching back as far as the Near Eastern goddess Cybele, whose cart was pulled by lions. More to the point, it has been suggested that the incestuous links between Njörd and his children in fact evoke the true nature of their hidden relationship: they are all, in reality, different faces of the same deity.

Freyja's falcon-feather coat implies a spirit journey: she manifests attributes of a shamanic shape-shifter and seeress, whose spirit can

take flight and return with secret knowledge. In this way she shares traits with Odin, and it is noteworthy that each of these gods serves also as a deity of the dead. Furthermore, animal-skin or bird-feather garments and ritual objects might well be seen to be associated with the magical practices and soothsaying rites we might gather together under the rubric of *seid*. Freyja, we are informed by Snorri, served among the Vanir as a high priestess of the arts of *seid*, and she was the first to teach these rites to the Æsir. Although it is clear from various sources that Odin was a willing pupil of these practices, it is equally clear that this was the form of magic most closely associated with women, and that its practice was considered suspect, at best, among the Æsir. Although it is apparent in the accounts of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir that *seid* could be destructive, most of the rites seem to have involved divination, especially concerning matters of the field and of the heart, the two domains in which Freyja reigned supreme.



This copper-alloy openwork brooch from 11th-century Norway displays an animal figure typical of the Urnes style, which combines zoomorphic forms with interlace.

It is intriguing that Snorri informs us that Freyja was the last of the surviving Norse goddesses, and there is reason to believe that aspects of her cult we would associate with *seid* rituals survived well into the Christian period in the northern world. Certainly the proliferation of place names associated with the goddess throughout Scandinavia bear out her widespread popularity. From various sources, it appears that *seid* rituals most often involved a seeress, called a *völva*, a term meaning ‘prophetess’ or ‘witch’, which may refer to the staff or wand sometimes used in such a rite; the most famous mythic example of such a figure is the eponymous *völva* of the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, the title of which means, literally, the *spá*, or ‘prophecy’, of the seeress. Odin himself called forth this seeress and compelled her to utter her prophecy, again underscoring that god’s penchant for gaining hidden knowledge through forbidden activities. In general practice, *völva* rituals seemed to have involved a raised platform upon which the seeress served as officiate, often surrounded by a chanting ward-circle of women. *Seid* practices are associated in some sources with curses and maladies, of course, as well as with shape-shifting (most especially into the figure of a horse), in which guise, presumably, one might crush one’s enemies. Generally, however, these rituals seem associated with divination, especially concerning crops, famine, pestilence and personal destinies, as well as in evoking blessings of health and fertility upon crops and people alike.

Perhaps one of the most instructive of the examples of such rites is preserved for us in *Eiríks saga rauða*, the Saga of Erik the Red, which famously discusses the Greenland settlements and reports of the travels of Leif the Lucky, son of Erik the Red, to Vinland in North America. In Greenland during this time there lived a *völva* by the name of Thorbjörg, the last of a group of ten seeresses. Thorbjörg made it her practice to travel from farm to farm during the winter months, predicting for those who invited her what would become of their lives and farms over the course of the coming year. Times had been tough of late, the hunting was scarce, and quite a few hunters had been lost to the wilds. The responsibility of determining when times would improve fell upon the leading farmer in each district, and so Thorkel invited Thorbjörg to visit his house and made arrangements to entertain her with appropriate honours: these preparations included

devising a high seat for the *völva*, complete with a cushion stuffed with chicken feathers. Thorbjörg arrived clad in a black mantle with a jewelled hem, a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin, white catskin gloves and calfskin boots, and holding a staff with a brass finial set with stones. The seeress wore a string of glass beads and carried at her waist a bag of charms necessary to perform her rites; she was belted with a linked girdle. The wise woman was greeted respectfully by all present, was asked to look over all of the people, animals and buildings comprising the farmstead, and then was seated upon her high seat, where she was served a gruel of kid's milk and a stew of heart flesh culled from all the kinds of animals available. After her meal the *völva* rebuffed any questions and took her rest.

As evening fell the next day, preparations were made for the divination ceremony, all items necessary for the ritual were gathered, and the *völva* called out for women who knew the ancient ward chants necessary to proceed. At first it appeared that no such women were present, but eventually it came to light that Gudrid, a Christian, had learned the proper chants at the knee of her foster mother in Iceland. Although Gudrid attempted to refrain from participating in these pagan rites because of her Christian faith, the host prevailed upon her, and finally she consented. The *völva* took her seat upon the raised platform, the women formed a circle about her, and Gudrid drew the spirits to the *völva* through the beauty of her chanting. The *völva* commended her for this, and reported that the poor seasons and long sickness that had harried the colony were at an end; she also predicted a brilliant match for Gudrid in Greenland, and that a long and prosperous line of descendants would spring forth from that union, which would be transplanted to Iceland. The *völva* had good answers for all who questioned her, and, so the saga claims, little she foresaw failed to come to pass. This saga, which preserves a pagan *seid* ritual, also treats the topic of the conversion of Greenland to Christianity: Gudrid is a professed Christian who only hesitantly acknowledges her childhood indoctrination into the heathen rites. We are also informed that this seeress is the last of a sisterhood of ten, and there is some evidence that such practitioners might have travelled in groups until the demise of the cult under the growing pressure of Christianity. Gudrid's reluctant participation in a rite presided over by the ageing

This 11th- or 12th-century Norwegian copper-alloy belt fitting features two horse heads, underscoring the importance of animal figures to Norse ornamental styles.



lone survivor of a ritual group speaks eloquently of the slow demise of this cult during the course of the Middle Ages. The catskin gloves and lining of the hood of the seeress evoke Freyja's link to cats, while the feather stuffing of the cushion provided for the seeress might provide a somewhat more tenuous link to the feather cloak of the goddess.

Perhaps the most well known of the myths in which Freyja plays an active role is that which recounts her acquisition of the Necklace of the Brísings, a treasure associated with a number of sagas and tales of the northern world; this precious object links the goddess to an ancient tradition that associates fertility goddesses with



This 5th-century gold pendant found in Suffolk most likely originated in Jutland or southern Scandinavia. The images combine the Romulus and Remus myth of Rome with Norse runes which reference the she-wolf of the classical myth. This blending of cultures underscores the duality of the goddess in both mythologies: she is nurturing life-giver at the same time that she is ravenous life-taker.

necklaces. *Brísingamen*, meaning either ‘necklace/girdle of fire’ or more probably the ‘necklace of the Brisings’, is referenced in several Old Norse sources, the earliest of which is thought to be *Húsdrápa*, a tenth-century skaldic poem by Ulf Uggason which is discussed in *Laxdæla saga* and cited by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Gylfagynning* of the *Prose Edda*; the necklace is a key identifying attribute of Freyja in *Thrymskvida* in the *Poetic Edda*. Heimdall is linked to the necklace in that poem, when he suggests that Thor wear it as a key component to the Thunder God’s drag costume, and elsewhere Heimdall and Loki are said to have clashed over the necklace. Most of the detail concerning Freyja’s gain and Loki’s theft of the necklace is preserved, however, in a Christianized version of the myth recounted in *Sörla thátttr* in the Icelandic *Flateyjarbók* (*Flatey Book* or Codex Flateyensis). The necklace is referred to as

Brosinga mene in *Beowulf*, and in it Háma (Heimir) is said to have stolen it from the hall of Eormenic.

In the fullest version of the myth of Freyja and the Necklace of the Brísings, we are told that one morning, leaving under cover of the dawn mists, the goddess departed her hall and crossed the rainbow bridge as she left the abode of the gods; she was all alone and on foot, and thought that all still slept. Unbeknown to the goddess, however, Loki noticed her movement, and, his curiosity piqued, he followed her as silently as a shadow. Freyja travelled all day across a rocky plain and frozen river and alongside a great glacier until, near nightfall, she followed the sound of hammering down a narrow passage and through a dank cavern into the hidden underground workshop of the dwarfs Álfrigg, Berlíngr, Dvalin and Grér. The goddess was at first blinded by the brilliant glare of the smithy until her gaze fell upon the most beautiful necklace she had ever seen, a river of precious fluid metal, and her heart was struck with an insurmountable desire to possess this peerless treasure. She offered the smiths gold and silver in great mounds, but the dwarfs refused with disdain what they had themselves already in plenty; only the price of her beautiful, shining body, to be shared in turn for a full night each, would satisfy the desire of the dwarfs, whose inflamed lust for the goddess reflected Freyja's own covetous longing for the necklace. Horrified by this demand, Freyja noticed for the first time the dark and ugly features of the misshapen dwarfs; her disgust, however, was soon outweighed by her desire, reckoning as she did that four nights in the foul embraces of the dwarfs was little enough to pay to be clasped for an eternity within the circlet of the most beautiful of treasures. Soon the deal was struck, and soon enough the bargain fulfilled: four nights later, the dwarfs fixed the necklace upon the goddess, and she departed, alone and undetected – or so she thought.

As Freyja entered the chambers of Sessrúmnir well-pleased with her new treasure, Loki, unseen by the goddess, continued on to the hall of the All-father, where he was all too happy to inform Odin that the object of the lust of the one-eyed god had sold herself to foul and repugnant dwarfs for the price of a bauble. Loki's mischievous joy turned quickly to cold fear in the face of the rage of Odin, however, who cast the trickster from his hall with the command that

Loki return with Freyja's ill-gotten treasure or not at all. The hall of Freyja is thought to be impassable to uninvited guests, but Loki was desperately afraid of the wrath of Odin, and so, taking on the shape of a fly, the Sly One searched high and low until he found a crack just big enough for a creepy-crawly insect to worm itself through. Once inside the hall, Loki silently found his way to the chamber of the goddess, who, like all her household, was fast asleep. Loki reached to take the necklace, but Freyja slept so that the clasp was covered. Transforming himself into the semblance of a flea, the trickster flitted about the body of the goddess, amusing himself upon her snowy terrain of flesh, and finally settling upon her cheek; finding a tender spot, the flea pierced Freyja's lovely skin. With a moan, the goddess turned in her sleep, exposing the clasp, and Loki, returned to his own form, soon pilfered the treasure with nimble fingers and fled Freyja's hall upon silent feet. When the goddess woke, she discovered her loss with a horror that soon turned to rage: only Loki might perform such a bold and audacious theft, and even he would be too timid without the express command of the Father of the Gods. Freyja stormed into Odin's presence to demand an apology, only to be confronted by his knowledge of her own whoring disgrace with the four dwarfs. The price of her necklace, Odin informed Freyja, was to be a recurring cycle of strife, bloodshed and magical resurrection through the dark forces of *seid*. The All-father commanded that Freyja bring two earthly rulers to the battlefield, each with twenty sub-kings and their warriors; as the armies slaughtered one another, the goddess was to devise incantations so that each bloody corpse might be brought back to life to fight again. Having sold her own body to gain her necklace, Freyja thought little of bartering the lives and bodies of warriors to regain the treasure, and so she and Odin reached an accord.

Necklaces have been associated with fertility goddesses in the Mediterranean from very early times, and there is evidence that this relationship also existed in southern Scandinavia from at least as early as the Bronze Age, as figures so adorned survive in Denmark dating from that period. Necklaces are generally thought to be vaginal symbols much like rings, and the Old Norse term *men* might be rendered as 'necklace' or 'girdle', either of which one might very well expect to be associated with fertility; indeed, it has been suggested

that the key significance of this myth lies in its function as a study of the association between sexual promiscuity and the development of fertility. In this case, the goddess's acquisition of the necklace illustrates not only a facet of her character but both an adolescent coming-of-age narrative and a metaphor for the reawakening of fecundity with the coming of each new spring. Because of an analogous reference in *Beowulf*, *Brisinga* is generally assumed to refer to a lost family name; more provocatively, it is possible that the term is derived from *brisingr*, an uncommon Old Norse term for fire. *Brisingamen*, the 'necklace of fire', might then refer literally to the brightness of the treasure itself; moreover, it would be tempting in that case to wonder if the name also might connote metaphorically the burning lust so commonly associated with the goddess Freyja. It has also been suggested that such 'fire' refers to the sun, which clearly resonates with the function of Freyja as a fertility goddess. Regardless, it is clear that we find in the myth of Freyja's acquisition of her necklace an intriguing inversion of the myth of Frey's loss of his sword, which he traded for a chance to wed the giantess Gerd, with whom he was besotted: in both cases hidden desires lead goddess and god to act upon the basest of motivations in response to secret and transgressive glimpses of forbidden fruit, and in both cases physical objects are imbued with nearly palpable symbolism through their association with various incarnations of desire.

This myth also serves as a primer of sorts into several facets of the character of Loki, the most enigmatic figure of the Norse pantheon. The catalyst for Odin's reaction to Freyja's whoring is, after all, Loki's predisposition to spy and to tattle, nasty attributes which are fundamental aspects of his role as a troublemaker who brews dissension for the sheer joy of mischief. When he finds that the fire he has built to cook Freyja's goose threatens to scorch him, Loki saves himself with his skills as a shape-shifter and a thief. All of these characteristics emphasize Loki's demonic volatility. This myth also illustrates that Freyja herself is a complex deity, and comprises contending and paradoxical attributes: the easy virtue which submits to the demands of the lustful dwarfs elucidates Freyja's function as a fertility goddess, of course, but she acquiesces with equal equanimity to Odin's command to sow carnage and death, much as a Valkyrie does. This duality reflects the twin powers of fertility and destruction

associated with Freyja, just as it reflects a similar duality concerning the forbidden magic she practised; it is thus noteworthy that Freyja has been convincingly linked with the figure of the sorceress thrice burned by the Æsir and thrice reborn through the flames. Thus began the first of all wars, in which *seid*, it should be remembered, was the great weapon of the fertility gods.

It is doubtless in any case that in Freyja we find the powers of life and death inextricably bound together; indeed, the terms Odin demands for the return of Freyja's necklace, a bargain which requires a continuing cycle of slaughter that is fed by miraculous resurrection, recalls both the spearing of and triple immolation of Gullveig, as recounted in the *Völuspá*, and reinforces Freyja's double identity. The rejuvenation of dead warriors in this myth echoes the daily battles of the *einherjar*, the dead warriors brought to Odin by the Valkyries to swell the ranks of the Æsir, and, perhaps tellingly, is also reminiscent of the warriors resurrected in the Cauldron of Plenty in the Welsh *Mabinogion*. In any case, this recurring battle is only ended, we are told in the late version of the story recorded in the Icelandic *Flateyjarbók*, through Christian intervention. This cycle of combat, referred to as *Hjadningavíg*, or the 'Strife of Hedin's men' after one of the two contending kings, thus provides a dark and gloomy counterpoint to the daily battles of Odin's heroes of Valhalla, who themselves, we know from our knowledge of the coming doom of Ragnarök, struggle in vain. Indeed, the motivations of the gods involved in this myth underscore their given functions and identities: Odin's jealous pride and seemingly needless bloodlust highlight and are highlighted by his need to swell the ranks of his warriors, as well as his nature as a war god; Loki's scheming prying and self-serving thieving illustrate his outsider status and his demonic nature as an enemy within the ranks of the gods; most importantly, Freyja's greedy materialism and overt and unapologetic sexuality bring to the fore the attributes and appetites to be associated with an ancient fertility goddess, while her association with death and dying elucidate her new and growing role as a destroyer goddess. Moreover, we can hardly attribute these characterizations as the work of the single hand of the author who recorded this myth; the sensibilities and actions resonate much too closely with the general characters of these gods as we know them.

Like her brother, Freyja is strongly linked with the boar, the association of which with both fecundity and ferocity mirrors the duality of the goddess herself. We learn in the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, or *Lay of Hyndla*, that Freyja's familiar is Hildisvíni, 'Battle-swine', whose very name reflects the appetite of his mistress for slaughter. Freyja informs the giantess Hyndla that Hildisvíni is the creation of the dwarfs Dáin and Nabbi, and her description of her boar as glowing and golden-bristled offers a suggestive link to Frey's familiar Gullinbursti. Hyndla is not the first nor the last to accuse Freyja of wantonness, but it is significant that in this poem, the giantess points out that the battle-boar Freyja rides upon is in reality none other than Freyja's votary and lover Óttar the Simple, who has pleased his goddess with ample blood sacrifices, and whose disguise may echo the ritual use of boar masks in the cult of Freyja. The double entendre of the great *Syr*, or 'Sow', mounted upon her lover the Battle-Swine is hardly insignificant, and thus this amusing episode seemingly concerned primarily with the lineage of Óttar might also offer glimpses of various faces of the goddess and rites of her worship.

The goddess shows herself in a darker mask in the stories surrounding the fate of the most beautiful of the gods: Baldr, the brightest and most beloved of the gods, was slain at the hand of his blind brother Höd, who cast a seemingly harmless dart of mistletoe at his 'invulnerable' sibling, instigated and guided by the cunning and duplicity of the malicious trickster Loki. Baldr's wife, the goddess Nanna, was completely overcome with grief at the death of her beloved. In fact, her desolation was so complete that, as the gods settled Baldr among the grave goods atop the pyre on board the ship, Nanna's heart burst from grief, and so the Æsir set wife next to husband for the journey to Hel. The archetypal Dying God and his consort clearly seem to represent ancient fertility figures, and if Baldr is the sleeping seed planted within the grave of apparently desolate earth, Nanna is the dormant power of increase which languishes with that seed. Moreover, scholars have long suggested a link between this mythic episode and sati practices, or the ritual sacrifice of consorts at the funerals of powerful men. Sati is a specifically Indian practice, but scholars of Norse and Germanic literature have long noted similarities between sati and episodes like this one in Norse texts. Such similarities are all

the more provocative when one takes note of the ancient relationship between the Nordic and Indian mythologies. According to the alternative version of the story of the death of the Baldr figure related by Saxo, however, Nanna's beauty was a motive force behind the death of Balderus, and thus in this iteration the ancient duality of the terrible beauty of the goddess is highlighted. In Saxo's account, Nanna is a Norwegian princess who is married to Balderus's adversary and killer Hotherus, who is cognate with the Höd of the more familiar myth. In Saxo's version, it is jealousy concerning Nanna that leads to the death of the Danish king Balderus, who is stabbed by a magic sword (which pierces his invulnerability) by his rival.

In addition, tradition has long attempted to link the Norse Nanna with her ancient Sumerian sister Inanna (also known as Nannar, or Nana), known to the Babylonians as Ishtar. The Phrygian Attis was the son of the eastern Nanna, whose consort was Baal, a figure from the ancient Near East who has sometimes himself been linked with Baldr. Although we must be extremely cautious in asserting that these relationships prove a definitive link across thousands of miles and years, the similarities of names and mythic archetypes certainly are, on their faces, suggestive of the possibility of common echoes of ancient fertility rites.

Our surmises concerning ritual sati practices in the northern world are not confined to the myth of Baldr's funeral, however; indeed, references to Scandinavian ship burials are not limited to accounts from Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature. In fact, the most vibrant and complete account is that of a Middle Eastern observer. In the early tenth century, an Arab named Ahmad ibn Fadlan gave an account of a ship burial among the Rus', or eastern Vikings; the events he recounted took place along the banks of the Volga river. The account of Ibn Fadlan is preserved in two sources: an eleventh-century copy of the *Risala*, Ibn Fadlan's record of his travels, and the Persian geographer Amin Razi's late sixteenth-century version of the same text, which is thought to have been based on early manuscripts. This account has some elements in common with the Old Norse mythic description of Baldr's funeral, as well as with the ceremony described at the end of the Old English epic *Beowulf*. Moreover, archaeological excavations at sites such as Oseberg in Norway and Sutton Hoo in



The iconic Sutton Hoo helmet was wrought of iron and tinned copper-alloy with some silver inlay, gold and garnets; it was probably made in Sweden in the early 7th century and subsequently was deposited in the most famous ship burial in England. Its animal and warrior motifs hearken back to Odin and his Valkyries, although the very presence of such elaborate grave goods in a cenotaph – or empty tomb – also underscores the shifting mythologies and ritual practices of the Age of Conversion, as the battle goddess Valkyries became replaced by or transformed into Anglo-Saxon virgin warrior saints.

East Anglia, England, corroborate some details concerning the practice of sending significant persons on their voyage to the otherworld well endowed with valuable and useful goods. Ibn Fadlan relates that poor men were placed in small boats and burned without much ado, while rich men had their estates divided into thirds: one-third provided an inheritance for the family, one-third was spent on grave clothes and related goods, and one-third was dedicated to purchasing an intoxicating beverage with which the mourners drank themselves oblivious for the length of time it took to prepare the funeral, which in the particular case he describes was some ten days.

The body of the deceased was kept in a temporary grave until the ceremony was prepared, and according to this Arab observer, the corpse he saw was well preserved and little worse for the delay because of the cold of the country, except for the fact that the skin blackened from the frost. On the day of the funeral the body was exhumed, dressed in finery, placed on a pavilion on board a ship and surrounded by valuable goods, food and weapons. The ship itself had been placed on scaffolding that would serve as a great pyre. A number of animal sacrifices comprised an important aspect of the funeral: Ibn Fadlan mentions cows, a dog and hens. In addition to the description of the ship and pyre themselves, Ibn Fadlan's account of the sacrifice of a pair of horses is especially evocative of the story of Baldr's funeral. Furthermore, the theory of travel to the underworld, which is foundational to the ceremony recorded in this account, maintains that all the treasure, animals and persons consumed by the flames will be transported to the otherworld; indeed, a bystander commented to Ibn Fadlan upon the stiff wind fanning the blaze of the pyre – to this witness it seemed that the god wished his follower to join him all the sooner. After the ashes of the ship burial had cooled, our chronicler relates, the mourners erected a mound upon the spot. There are several references to funeral pyres in *Beowulf*, most notably the description of the hero's cremation at the very end of the epic. The *Beowulf* poet goes into more detail than Ibn Fadlan about the mound raised over the ashes of Beowulf and the treasure dedicated to him. We are told that the chosen spot was on a prominent headland, and that the walls were high and broad enough so that the tomb was visible from far out at sea; furthermore, the very best masonry work was dedicated to this monument.

According to Ibn Fadlan, an important aspect of the funeral ceremony he witnessed, for an important male personage, was the sacrifice of a female slave who volunteered to become her master's wife in death. Upon the occasion of the master's death, the female slaves were assembled and given the opportunity to join the dead man in a sort of posthumous marriage. One of the slave girls volunteered, and we are told that seldom had a victim to be compelled; Ibn Fadlan further notes that once the commitment was made, it could not be broken. For the time remaining until the funeral, the slave girl was bedecked in finery, sang and danced, drank her fill of the intoxicating beverage and performed ritual sex acts with the male kinsmen of her master (this the kinsmen did, so they claimed, out of loyalty and obligation to her lord). As the time for the ceremony approached, a ritual doorframe was erected, and the slave girl was hoisted to look over this frame to see into the next world. She was lifted three times: the first time she reported seeing her parents, the second time she claimed to see the host of her dead relations and the third time she cried out that she had seen her master awaiting her in a verdant paradise. She thus called out to be taken to her master, and she was brought on board the ship, where an old woman called the Angel of Death orchestrated another series of ritual sex acts, culminating in the sacrifice of the willing slave girl by strangulation and stabbing; meanwhile, the men outside the ship raised such a clamour that a slave girl witnessing the ceremony could not hear the sounds on the ship, and therefore would not fear to join her own master when the time came.

In the context of this account, the story of Nanna's heart bursting with despair at Baldr's funeral and ultimately sharing her husband's pyre aboard *Hringhorni* is rendered more than a little troubling; what at first blush seems in the myth a poignant description of spousal grief takes on sinister undertones in light of the Arab emissary's description of the ritual rape and human sacrifice of a slave bride aboard a ship burial. The evidence of language is also suggestive on this point: the Valkyries are referred to at least once, in *Völuspá*, as the *nannas* of Odin, and thus it is possible that *nanna* could refer to a woman or dedicated servant in general and not just to a particular individual married to Baldr, an evocative linguistic possibility which might link Nanna's death with the ritual human sacrifice described by Ibn

Fadlan. Furthermore, the fact that the slave girl was simultaneously strangled and stabbed is suggestive of an identification with sacrificial rites associated with Odin, whose victims and votaries were often marked with a spear, and who is of course himself the Hanging God. While hardly evidence of a definitive relationship, the resonance between the two episodes in any case forces a thoughtful reader to cast a somewhat critical eye over the death of Nanna in the myth of Baldr's funeral. Certainly the sacrifice of Baldr's horse and harness echoes the ritual described by Ibn Fadlan, as does the description of grave goods and ship burning, and these parallels suggest that we must closely examine the possible relationships between aspects of these episodes. On the other hand, the death of Lit, an unfortunate dwarf who ran under Thor's feet during the funeral ceremony, and whom the thunder god kicked onto the pyre to burn, has no clear parallel. Although Lit is described in some sources as an enemy of the gods, it would be difficult to prove that his death represents a traditional funeral rite of some kind, although it has been suggested that his dying contortions might hearken back to funereal cultic dancing. As tempting as such a reading might be, we cannot substantiate such an assertion with any confidence, and thus, more than in the case of the description of the death of Nanna, Thor's slaying of the dwarf remains rather unintelligible; some might say that it takes on the trappings of a comic interlude. The burning of Baldr's ship, however, remains a deadly serious affair, serving as it does as a foretaste of the conflagration to come, that which concludes Ragnarök.

Any discussion of death in general, or The Doom of the Gods in particular, requires that we examine Hel, the death goddess of the northern world. Snorri describes Niflheim as an abode for the dead into which Odin cast Hel, the daughter of Loki, who thus became queen of the underworld. Hel is described as being half white and half black, half beautiful woman and half rotting corpse. An inversion of the Apples of Idun emphasizes this duality: just as those golden apples are the fruit of life, which offer eternal youth, so the Apples of Hel are linked with death in Norse poetry. Hel thus exemplifies another manifestation of the 'terrible beauty' of the northern goddess, wherein terror, death and destruction are often hand in glove with beauty, life and creation, and some have compared Hel to the

Indian goddess Kali in this respect. Hel holds sway over a realm below and to the north, a direction which offers a possible clue to ancient origins: *north* in the Germanic languages is related to the Greek term *nertheros*, ‘regarding the nether-regions’. ‘North’ is generally taken as ‘lower left’ in the ancient Scandinavian languages, relative to one facing east and given the position of the noontime sun in the northern sky. Hel’s domain is the home of those who die of disease and old age, and is described as a dank, dark, unpleasant place: Hel’s hall is known as Eljudnir, ‘Damp Spot’, where her manservant is Ganglati, ‘Slow One’; her maidservant is Ganglot, ‘Lazy One’; Hel’s bed is Kor, ‘Sickness’; and her table is set with ‘Hunger’.

Hel, whose name evokes the ‘hidden’, ‘concealed’ and ‘secret’ nature of the grave and thus of the nether regions in several Germanic languages, represents a late, perhaps Christian-era, personification of the underworld; a certain intensification of the concept of a dark and dismal afterlife into a place of ‘hellish’ torment might well have resulted through a Christian revision of the old myths. While the term ‘Niflheim’ seems to come from Snorri, the related name Niflhel, ‘Dark Hell’ or ‘Misty Hell’, appears to have been used earlier. Snorri uses these names almost interchangeably, however, and suggests that both these terms refer to the ninth world, a ‘lower hell’ (as an alternate reading of *nifl* might suggest) reserved for the truly evil dead. Muspell (or Muspelheim), the land of fire, is generally not counted among the nine worlds, but clearly was thought to have existed before the Creation and was expected to consume the world after the cataclysmic battle of Ragnarök. The pagan Germanic concept of a land of fire and its relationship with an apocalyptic end of the world survived the conversion to Christianity, and related terms and concepts reassert themselves in Old Saxon, Old High German and Old English religious literature. Hel – along with her bastard siblings Jörmundgandr, the World Serpent, and Fenrir, the great wolf who will swallow Odin in the final battle – was spawned by the demonic trickster Loki upon the loins of the giantess Angrboda, ‘Grief-bringer’, and all three of these siblings represent the forces of evil, chaos and destruction that the Scandinavian gods try, ultimately in vain, to keep at bay.



This 6th-century Merovingian bird brooch calls to mind the associations between various Celtic goddesses and birds.