



Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

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Odin's Wife, Frigg

“Although the conception of a mother goddess remains a shadowy one, and Frigg in particular is an obscure figure, it is no longer customary to dismiss her as of little importance, and to explain her away as a pure literary creation. As Odin's wife and the queen of Asgard, she plays a consistent part in the poetry, and the lack of detail about her in myths and the failure to find place names named after her may be due to the fact that she was remembered under other titles.”

—*Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*. H.R. Ellis Davison, 1964. p.114.

Odin's lawful wife Frigg is the oldest continually known Germanic goddesses. Her name appears in the Anglo-Saxon transliteration of the Roman names of the days of the week. The modern designation of the fifth day, Friday, which corresponds to the Latin *dies Veneris*, Venus' Day, is named for her, from the Anglo-Saxon *Fricg* (*Frycg*), Old Norse *Frigg*, Old Saxon *Frî*, Old High German *Frîja*. That Frigg is identified with Venus, the Roman goddess of Love, is fitting considering her name is thought to derive from a proto-Germanic word, **friyo*, from the Indo-European **priya*, meaning 'dear, beloved.'¹

Frigg is widely recorded as Odin's wife in sources dating from 750 AD onward. She and Odin have been directly linked since their first appearance together in the anonymous *Origo Gentis Langobardorum*, The Origin and History of the Lombards. There Odin and Frigg appear as Godan and Frea, engaged in a dispute over whom to show favor, the Winnili, Frea's favorites, or the Vandals, Godan's choice:

“Ambri and Assi, that is the leaders of the Vandals, asked Godan to give them victory over the Winnilies. Godan answered, say thus, ‘I shall give victory to those whom I first see at sunrise.’

¹ West, *ibid*, p. 144.

At that time Gambara, with her two sons, that is Ybor and Agioo, who were chieftains over the Winnilies, asked Frea, to be propitious to the Willilies. Then Frea gave advice that the Willilies should come at sunrise, and that their women should also come with their husbands with their hair let down around their face like beards.

“When it became light as the sun was rising, Frea, the wife of Godan, turned the bed, where her husband was lying, putting his face toward the east, and woke him up. And looking at them, he saw the Winnilies and their women having their hair let down around their faces; and he said: "Who are these long-bearded ones?" And Frea said to Godan, ‘Since you have given them a name, give them also the victory’ And he gave them the victory, so that they should defend themselves according to this plan and gain victory. Since that time the Winnilies were called the Longobards.”²

It should be noted that the Lombards or Longobards (“Long-beards”) are the same tribe that Tacitus knew as the “Longobardi.” Among the tribes listed by Tacitus in *Germania* Chapter 40 as devotees of the earth-goddess Nerthus, the Longobardi play a prominent role:

“The Langobardi are distinguished by being few in number. Surrounded by many mighty peoples they have protected themselves not by submissiveness, but by battle and boldness. Next to them come the Reudigni, Aviones, Anglii, Varini, Eudoses, Suarines and Huitones protected by rivers and forests. There is nothing especially noteworthy about these states individually, but they are distinguished by a common worship of Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth, and believe she intervenes in human affairs and rides through their peoples.”³

While it may be argued that the Longobardi are not included among the tribes who worship Nerthus, nothing prevents us from drawing this conclusion. The text is ambiguous on this point. The Longobardi may be included among the states distinguished by their worship of “Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth” depending on how the text is read. That Tacitus intended to include them becomes probable when we discover that the Longobardi (Lombards), in their earliest historical chronicle, are also said to venerate a goddess who intervenes in human affairs. Instead of *Nerthum* who is *Terra Mater*, their anonymous first chronicler informs us that the Lombards have long honored Odin’s wife, Frea (“the beloved”), who once saved their people and was instrumental in renaming their tribe. Less than five centuries separate his testimony from that of Tacitus.

Fifty years later, the first-named Lombardian chronicler, Paul the Deacon (Paulus Diaconus), retells the same tale, informing us from his Christian perspective that it is a *ridicula fabla* (a silly story) told by old men. That it was preserved in a Christian chronicle long after the conversion of the Lombards to Christianity demonstrates its age and importance to the people. Paul writes:

“The men of old tell a silly story that the Wandals coming to Godan besought him for victory over the Winnili and that he answered that he would give the victory to those whom he saw first at sunrise; that then Gambara went to Frea, wife of Godan and asked for victory for the Winnili, and that Frea gave her counsel that the women of the Winnili should take down their hair and arrange it upon the face like a beard, and that in the early morning they should be present with their husbands and in like manner station themselves to be seen by Godan from the quarter in which he had been wont to look through his window toward the east. And so it was done. And when Godan saw them at sunrise he said: "Who are these long-beards?" And then Frea induced

² John Stanley Martin tr.

³ A.R. Birley tr.

him to give the victory to those to whom he had given the name. And thus Godan gave the victory to the Winnili. These things are worthy of laughter and are to be held of no account.”⁴

The information in these 8th century accounts coincides with what we learn of Odin in later Icelandic sources. Here, Godan and Frea already appear with the recognizable attributes and personality traits of Odin and Frigg. Godan is imagined as surveying the earth from his window. This corresponds to Odin’s position in the *Prose Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 17), which informs us that from his throne Hlidskjalf, Odin can view the entire world. The events of this tale are sometimes seen as an analog to the tale told in the prose prologue to the poem *Grímnismál*.

“Odin and Frigg were sitting in Hlidskjalf, looking over all the world. Odin said, ‘Seest thou Agnar, thy foster-son, where he is getting children with a giantess in a cave? while Geirröd, my foster-son, is a king residing in his country.’ Frigg answered, ‘He is so inhospitable that he tortures his guests, if he thinks too many come.’ Odin replied that that was the greatest falsehood; and they wagered thereupon. Frigg sent her waiting-maid Fulla to bid Geirröd be on his guard, lest the trollmann [sorcerer] who was coming should do him harm, and also say that a token whereby he might be known was, that no dog, however fierce, would attack him. But that King Geirröd was not hospitable was mere idle talk. He, nevertheless, caused the man to be secured whom no dog would assail. He was clad in a blue cloak, and was named Grímnir, and would say no more concerning himself, although he was questioned. The king ordered him to be tortured to make him confess, and to be set between two fires; and there he sat for eight nights.”⁵

In both sources, Odin and Frigg are depicted as a divine couple actively involved in human affairs. From his seat in heaven, Odin observes the affairs of men and grants victory in battle to those he favors. He and his wife disagree over their favorites and Frigg gains the upper hand. In the history of the Lombards, Frigg plays a more active part. She physically turns her husband’s bed before sunrise causing him to see her charges first and rename them. The Lombards revere her for this act. Among the tribes who are said to worship Nerthus, we find the Longobardi and the Anglii. As we have seen, the Anglo-Saxon *Æcerbót* contains clear evidence that the Anglii continued to worship an earth-goddess for centuries after their conversion.⁶ Likewise, less than 500 years after Tacitus’ report, the Lombards revere Odin’s wife Frigg, who like Nerthus, is said to intervene in human affairs. This is a powerful indicator that Odin’s wife, Frigg, was originally identical to *Terra Mater*, the Earth-mother of the early Germanic tribes who entered history as the Angles and the Lombards.

We find further evidence of the marriage of Odin and Frigg in the Merseburg Charms, two verses discovered in 1841 by Dr. Georg Waitz in a theological manuscript from Fulda, a city located in Hesse, Germany—home to many of the Frau Holle legends. These verses are believed to date from the 10th century, and comprise the earliest record of German paganism in that language. The *Second Merseburg Charm* contains the earliest known reference to Odin and Frigg’s son, Baldur. It reads:

⁴ William Dudley Foulke tr.

⁵ Benjamin Thorpe translation, 1865.

⁶ See Part I of this article, section 2: *The Æcerbot*.

*Phol ende Uuodan
uuoron zi holza,
du uuart demo Balderes volon
sin vuoz birenkit;
thu biguolen Sinthgunt,
Sunna era suister;
thu biguol en Friia,
Volla era suister,
thu biguolen Uuodan,
so he uuola conda:
 sose benrenki,
 sose bluotrenki,
 sose lidirenki:
 ben zi bena,
 bluot zi bluoda,
 lid zi geliden,
 sose gelimida sin.*

Phol and Wodan
rode into the woods,
There the foot of Baldur's foal
went out of joint.
It was charmed by Sinthgunt,
Sunna her sister;
It was charmed by Friia,
Volla her sister;
It was charmed by Wodan,
as he well knew how.
Bone-sprain,
as blood-sprain,
as limb-sprain:
Bone to bone,
blood to blood,
Limb to limb,
As though they were glued.

Because this verse stands alone as the sole poetic record of these gods on German soil, and is separated from the Scandinavian records by more than three centuries, scholars are reluctant to unequivocally identify the deities of this fragment with those of Eddaic mythology. The verse speaks of an otherwise unknown episode in Old Norse mythology, the laming of Baldur's horse. Nevertheless, we can easily recognize many surfaces of contact. Here we find not only Wotan and Friia (Odin and Frigg), but Fulla (Volla) known from later Icelandic sources. In the *Prose Edda*, Fulla is said to be a handmaiden of Frigg, who keeps her casket and personal effects; here she is her sister, naturally explaining their close relationship. In *Gylfaginning* 35 and an older verse by Eyvind Skaldaspillir preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* 36, Fulla is said to wear a golden snood.⁷ This and her role as Frigg's casket bearer suggest a goddess of plenty, an appropriate role for the sister and handmaiden of the Earth Mother. Many scholars have suggested she represents the fullness of the earth.

Scholars have long debated the meaning of the name Phol and the word *balderes* in this verse. Phol is sometimes interpreted as the male member of an otherwise unattested couple: Phol and Volla. Likewise scholars have argued that the word *balderes* should be understood as a simple appellation meaning "lord", also otherwise unattested in German. Today, this is a minority view. Rudolf Simek clearly states that "this is difficult to prove, and therefore the *Second Merseburg Charm* should continue to be regarded as the first recording of the name Baldr."⁸ Scholar John Lindow unequivocally agrees, stating that "Frija, the Old High German equivalent of Frigg, participates in the curing of Baldere's (Balder's) horse."⁹ Not surprisingly then, in the *Second Merseburg Charm*, we find Odin and Frigg associated with Baldur, their famous son, whose death is a central storyline in later Scandinavian sources.

From the 11th century, we find further evidence of the name Frigg in the fourth book of the work of Adam of Bremen, known as *Gesta Ecclesiae Hammaburgensis Pontificum*:

"(25) Now we shall say a few words about the superstitions of the Swedes. (26) That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Björkö. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wotan—that is, the Furious—carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove. The people also worship heroes made gods, whom they endow with immortality because of their remarkable exploits, as one reads in the *Vita* of Saint Ansgar they did in the case of King Eric. (27) For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wotan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Frikko."¹⁰

⁷ Faulkes, *Edda*, pp. 29, 98-99.

⁸ Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 278, s.v. *Second Merseburg Charm*.

⁹ *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, p. 128.

¹⁰ Translation by Francis J. Tschan; *Adam of Bremen, History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, (Columbia University, 1959). In Book 4, Chapter 9 of the same work, a man named Egino "broke to pieces a highly esteemed image of Frikko."

While Frikko is undoubtedly a male god best identified as Frey, his name presents a problem, since it does not correspond with that of Frey, but Frigg.¹¹ The name Frikko is a masculine version of the name Frigg, leading some scholars to conclude that Adam of Bremen confused their names; that Frikko oversees marriage seems to confirm this view.¹² Whether Adam confused their names or not, in Fricco, we have a solid reference to the name Frigg in the 11th century associated with Odin, Thor and Frey. The history of Olaus Magnus, written in the 16th century, lends credence to this by placing a female deity named Frigga in the temple of Uppsala. She regulated “peace and pleasure.” Her image “shamelessly flaunted its sex.”¹³ He depicts her carrying a bow and a sword, and says that the constellation *Friggerocken* (Frigg’s Spinning Wheel) was named for her. This late treatment may simply be an embellishment of Adam of Bremen’s earlier account, but in any case, we cannot eliminate the possibility of a divine pair of Vanir represented under the names *Frigg* and *Fricco*.¹⁴

Chronologically, Frigg next appears in Saxo’s *Gesta Dancorum*, Book 1, written in Denmark a generation before the work of Icelander Snorri Sturluson. As always, she is presented as the wife of Odin:

“At this time there was one Odin, who was credited over all Europe with the honour, which was false, of godhead. ...The kings of the North, desiring more zealously to worship his deity, embounded his likeness in a golden image; and this statue, which betokened their homage, they transmitted with much show of worship to Byzantium, fettering even the effigied arms with a serried mass of bracelets. Odin was overjoyed at such notoriety, and greeted warmly the devotion of the senders. But his queen Frigga, desiring to go forth more beautified, called smiths, and had the gold stripped from the statue. Odin hanged them, and mounted the statue upon a pedestal, which by the marvellous skill of his art he made to speak when a mortal touched it. But still Frigga preferred the splendour of her own apparel to the divine honours of her husband, and submitted herself to the embraces of one of her servants; and it was by this man’s device she broke down the image, and turned to the service of her private wantonness that gold which had been devoted to public idolatry. Little thought she of practicing unchastity, that she might the easier satisfy her greed, this woman so unworthy to be the consort of a god; but what should I here add, save that such a godhead was worthy of such a wife?”¹⁵

Among scholars, this episode is most frequently seen as analogous to the instance in *Lokasenna* 26; when Loki accuses Frigg of infidelity with her husband’s brothers. The same verse says that she is *Fjörgynns mæi*.¹⁶ This could be interpreted to mean that she was Fjörgynn’s mistress, (cp. *Oðs mey*, *Völuspá* 25) but Fjörgynn is not found as an Odin name.¹⁷ Instead, Snorri informs us that she is Fjörgynn’s daughter. Although many translators have mistakenly taken the name to be that of the earth-goddess, the name Fjörgynn is a masculine version of the earth-epithet Fjörgynr. A male Fjörgynn is otherwise unattested in the Old Norse canon. Despite this difficulty, Frigg is firmly

¹¹ Simek, *ibid.* s.v. Fricco, p. 93.

¹² Simek, *ibid.* s.v. Fricco, p. 93.

¹³ Olaus Magnus, *A Description of the Northern Peoples 1555*, Vol. 1, Book 3, ch. 3; edited by P.G. Foote, (Hakluyt Society, 1996).

¹⁴ Näsström, *ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁵ Oliver Elton translation.

¹⁶ The same word is used in *Völuspá* 25 of Freyja who is designated as *Oðs mey*.

¹⁷ Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, sv Fjörgyn.

linked to the Earth; her father's name is identical to a well-known epithet of Jörd, the Earth. Most often, the reference is viewed as ancient, originating in an older strata of the mythology which survived into the Eddaic era, allowing Loki to satirize it. For example, Ursula Dronke suggests that Fjörgynn may have been the partner of Thor's mother, Fjörgyn, the earth, with the caveat that "that would have been in an older pantheon."¹⁸ Martin West explains:

"The Norse pantheon includes a god Fjörgynn and a goddess Fjörgyn. These go back to *Perk^wún(i)yos, *Perk^wuni. Apart from having a stem in -yo- instead of -o-, the masculine name corresponds exactly to that of the Baltic thundergod. Fjörgynn is an obsolescent figure, mentioned only as the father of Frigg (*Lokasenna* 26, *Gylf.* 9, *Skáld.* 19), and we cannot tell from the Nordic evidence what he originally stood for.¹⁹

...Parjanya is called the son of Dyaus (Rv. 7, 102,1), which expresses his natural relationship with the sky. Sometimes he takes the place of Dyaus as the consort of the Earth who fertilizes her with his seed and so fathers living creatures (5, 83, 4; 7,101, 3; AV 12, 1, 42). He is especially associated with the rains and *parjanya-* as a common noun means 'rain-cloud'. He is pictured as a bellowing bull who deposits his semen in the plants (Rv 5, 83, 1; 7, 101, 6), But he is also a thunderer (5, 83, 2-9; 10, 66, 10) and dispenser of lightning (5, 83. 4; AV 19, 30, 5, TS 3, 4, 7, 2). ...His name has long been felt to belong in the company of Perkunas, Fjörgynn and the others."²⁰

Although many scholars take it as a mere genealogical statement, his naming in the context of *Lokasenna* 26 is sometimes thought to imply an insult. Loki may well be implying that, as a god symbolizing fertilizing rain, Fjörgynn fertilized his own daughter, the earth. Such an innuendo would be in line with the thrust of Loki's general attack. The evidence is simply too slight to draw any definite conclusions.

Despite her lengthy appearance in the historic record, Frigg is best known from the Icelandic sources, where she is depicted as Odin's wife, ever by his side. In the prose header of the poem *Grimnismál*, she sits beside him in Hlidskjalf, looking out over the world. In *Vafþrúdnismál*, he asks her advice before going out, to which she replies, "I'd rather keep the Father of Hosts at home in the courts of the gods."²¹ In *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 19, when the gods receive Heimdall and the goddesses receive Loki after an ill-fated journey to the underworld, the gathered gods salute "Hropt (Odin) and Frigg"²² as they retire from the feast. As the constant wife of Odin, Frigg's most memorable role is that of Baldur's mourning mother. Once the fog is lifted, her nature as an earth-goddess in this myth becomes clear.

¹⁸ Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, Vol. II, p. 363.

¹⁹ West, *ibid*, p. 241

²⁰ West, *ibid*, pp. 244-5.

²¹ Verse 2, Carolyne Larrington tr.

²² Verse 23; <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/hrg/hrg.html>