

## The Cult of Freyr and Freyja

by William P. Reaves

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“Students of Old Norse Mythology should not despair at the sheer range of possible approaches to its interpretation. The fact that some myths seem naturally to repel certain approaches and invite others does not undermine or favor the validity of any particular approach; it is only a function of the breadth of our current ideas about what constitutes myth.” Peter Orton, “Pagan Myth and Religion” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, Edited by Rory McTurk, p. 317.

Why does Snorri fail to tell the story of Freyja and her husband in more detail, particularly when he tells other popular myths at great length? Certainly, the courtship and marriage of Freyja must have been a well-known tale even in his day. Could the popularity of Freyja herself have contributed to Snorri’s reluctance to further elaborate on their story? We can never know the answer with any certainty, but the sources we have available for study offer clues.

At the end of the heathen era in Iceland, Freyja retained a powerful following. Icelandic documents inform us that her worship continued until the time of the Christian conversion. Since heathen practices were allowed to continue, so long as they occurred outside of public view, there is no reason to doubt that her cult actively continued afterwards. During the conversion period itself, her worship became a source of contention between the heathens and Christians. At the Althing in the summer of 999, the skald Hjalti Skeggjasson mocked Freyja in a verse delivered from the law-rock. This couplet preserved in *Íslendingabók*, ch. 7, and *Njalssaga*, ch. 102, reads:

*Vik ek eigi goð geyja, grey þykki mér Freyja.*

“I have no desire to bark at the gods, I consider Freyja a bitch.”<sup>1</sup>

The word *geyja* means both “to mock” (blaspheme) and “to bark.”<sup>2</sup> The heathens took this as blasphemy and Runólfr the temple-priest of Dalur at Eyjafjöll sentenced Hjalti to lesser outlawry.<sup>3</sup> This allusion may be more than figurative, as Freyja calls the witch Hyndla, whose names means “bitch,” her “sister” in *Hyndluljóð*, verse 1. We find additional evidence for the veneration of Freyja in *Hyndluljóð*, verse 10, where, Freyja commends her lover Ottar for raising a shrine to her and sacrificing on its altar.

*Hörg hann mér gerði  
hlaðinn steinum  
nú er grjót það  
að gleri orðið,*

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<sup>1</sup> John McKinnell tr. *Meeting the Other in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Íslendinga saga* by Jón Jóhannesson; *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, translated by Haraldur Bessason, University of Manitoba Press, 1974. p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> *Landnamabók*, 367; *The Book of Settlements*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, 1972, University of Manitoba Press, p. 137.

*rauð hann í nýju  
nauta blóði  
æ trúði Óttar  
á sýnjur:*

“He has made me an altar,  
faced with stone,  
now that stone has turned to glass;<sup>4</sup>  
he has reddened the new altar  
with ox blood,  
Ottar has always trusted  
in the Asynjor.”

Snorri informs us that Freyja is the most approachable of the gods, second in rank only to Odin’s wife, Frigg. He says that it is good to pray to her concerning love affairs and that she delights in love-poetry (*Gylfaginning* 24, 35). Perhaps because of this, the Christian law-book *Grágas* severely prohibited such poetry under the common law of Iceland.<sup>5</sup>

In which, “defamation of the rival is almost as important as praise of the beloved. Thus mansöngur is originally closer to love magic than to love lyric.”<sup>6</sup>

Freyja’s sexual appetites are well known, and cats, one of the most lascivious of animals known in the north, drew her car.<sup>7</sup> In this respect she was the very anti-thesis of the goddess of the new religion, the virgin Mary. Both Frigg and Freyja are called on to assist in childbirth (*Oddrunrgrátr* 9) as well as invoked together in spells specific to curing equine ailments.<sup>8</sup> Early Christian law explicitly forbids recourse to the old healing charms.<sup>9</sup> Away from the eye of the authorities, however, these practices continued unabated in northern communities; at times, even Christian members of the community availed themselves of this alternative treatment method, particularly in the case of *seiðr*,<sup>10</sup> the magic art Freyja taught to the gods.<sup>11</sup> In particular, *seiðr* was thought to contain a restorative or a regenerative power, powerful enough to even resurrect the dead.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some commentators suggest that the stones turned to glass due to frequent sacrifice. More recently, John McKinnell observed that glass in Old Norse verse is always associated with precious objects, and that the conceit of altar stones transformed into glass may allude to Freyja’s characteristic love of costly things (McKinnell, *ibid.*, p. 86-87).

<sup>5</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 175, citing *Grágás* II, V. Finsen ed, 1852, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> I.G. Matyushina, “The Earliest European Lyrical Poetry”; <http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/matushina4.htm> (last viewed 9-6-08)

<sup>7</sup> Turville-Petre, *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>8</sup> Britt-Mari Näsström, *Freyja—Great Goddess of the North*, p. 110, citing F. Genzmer, “Da signed Krist—på biguolen Wuodan, 1949 Arv, pp. 37-68; F. Ohrt, *Da signed Krist—tolkning av det religiöse inhold i Danmarks signelser og beværgelser*, 1927, Copenhagen; *De danske besværgelser mod vrid og blod*, 1922, Copenhagen.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas DuBois, *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> *Ynglingsaga*, ch. 4

<sup>12</sup> Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 1997, p. 108.

According to both *Grímnismál* and *Gylfaginning*, Freyja owns the hall *Sessrumnir* (Many-seats) which stands on *Folkvangr* (the People's plain). There she welcomes half of the war-fallen. Odin receives the other half into Valhalla. Thus, Freyja was associated not only with procreation and childbirth, but also with death and the afterlife, completing the full circle of the life-cycle. In *Egil's Saga*, ch. 79, Egil's daughter Thorgerd expresses her belief that upon dying, she will go to join Freyja, (*engan hefi eg náttverð haft, og engan mun eg fyrr en að Freyju*). As a destination for the dead, Freyja's *Folkvangr* directly competes with the early Catholic concepts of heaven and hell as the exclusive destination of departed souls, providing yet another reason for Snorri not to detail her cult. Of course, we cannot now know Snorri's intentions, but suffice it to say, Christians found the cult of Freyja in particular offensive. The morality exhibited in her mythology, and more broadly by the Vanir cult which she represents, is often in direct conflict with Christian tenets which promote the pretence of celibacy among its priests. As a rule, however, this precept was not practiced among early Icelandic converts. Among them, the priesthood was hereditary and priests themselves raised families as they had under the old religion.

Freyja and her brother Freyr are the children of the god Njörd and his unnamed sister (*Lokasenna* 36, *Ynglingasaga* 4). Along with their father, they are the foremost representatives of the Vanir, a tribe of divinities most often characterized as gods of wealth and fertility. Incest was customary among this divine clan, but forbidden among the Aesir.<sup>13</sup> In *Lokasenna*, Loki first accuses Freyja of having slept with every god and elf (*Ása ok álfa*) gathered in Aegir's hall, presumably including her father and brother.<sup>14</sup> To underscore this point, he then states that Freyja, when surprised by the gods "beside her brother," farted (*Lokasenna* 32). In the following verse, her father defends her actions, saying there is little harm that a lady gets herself a man or two, calling it an outrage that an emasculate god like Loki, who has borne babies, should mention it.<sup>15</sup>

The Vanir were widely popular divinities, attested in many sources. In agricultural districts in Norway and Sweden, numerous names having *Freyr-* as the first element are recorded.<sup>16</sup> Most often the god's name is compounded with words for fields and meadows, such as *Freysakr*, *Freysland*, and *Freysvin*. Others, such as *Freyshof*, *Freysvé* and *Freyslundr* suggest places of public worship. Snorri tells us that Freyr is the ruler of rain and sunshine, and thus of the produce of the earth. He also rules the wealth of men. Thus, it is good to pray to him for peace and prosperity (*Gylfaginning* 24). *Heimkringla's Hakonar Saga Aðalsteinsfóstra*, preserves the ancient custom of dedicating the first toast to Odin for the king's victory and power and the second and third to Freyr and Njörd for peace and good harvests. (ch. 14, *Skyldi fyrst Óðins full, skyldi það drekka til sigurs og ríkis konungi sínum, en síðan Njarðar full og Freys full til árs og friðar*).

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<sup>13</sup> *Heimskringla, Ynglingasaga*, ch. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Lokasenna* 29: The word *Ás* (pl. *Æsir*) is no hindrance to the inclusion of the Vanir gods Njörd and Freyr. In *Gylfaginning* 23, Snorri counts Njörd as an *áss*, and in *Gylfaginning* 24, says that Freyr is the *ágætasti af ásum* (most glorious of the Aesir) and Freyja is *ágætust af ásynjum* (most glorious of the Asynjar).

<sup>15</sup> *Lokasenna* 33, following the Ursula Dronke tr.

<sup>16</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 168, citing: Magnus Olsen, *Nordisk Kultur* XXVI, p. 60 ff and *The Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway*, 1928 p. 263 ff; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* ed 2, II, 1957, p. 195; E. Wessén, *Studier i Nordisk Filologi* XIV, 1923. and *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* IV, 1929, p. 97 ff.

The cult of Freyr, closely connected to that of Freyja, was associated with kingship throughout pagan Scandinavia, and therefore represented a viable threat to the encroachment of a new religion. The people of Scandinavia were often converted to Christianity only after the conversion of their king. The Norwegian King Ólaf Tryggvesson is considered the first missionary king of Norway, and credited with converting not only Norway, but Iceland and Greenland as well. Many monarchs struggled to keep their newfound faith, most often against the will of the people they governed. One of the Ynglings, King Ólaf Haraldsson was later canonized as Saint Ólaf for his effort. Backsliding in this environment was not uncommon.

Sweden was the last of the Scandinavian kingdoms to develop into a unified state. Christianity was slower to take hold here. Its people consisted of the Svear, centered in the region around Uppsala and the Götar to the south. The first king known to have ruled both the Svear and the Götar was Olof Skötkonung, who ruled until his death in 1022. Olof was the first Swedish king to actively promote the new religion there, establishing the first bishopric in 1014 at Skara. Olof was succeeded by his son Jákob, an ally of Ólaf Haraldsson the king of Norway, and reigned after his father until his own death in 1055 AD. After his reign, Sweden entered into a period of political instability for nearly a century. The pagan cult at Uppsala continued to flourish until the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The country was finally permanently unified in 1172, but the Swedes themselves were not fully Christianized until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Icelandic records, Yngvi-Freyr was long remembered as a divine king of the Swedes. According to Snorri's prose account in *Ynglingasaga*, he was once a human king whose reign was one of peace and plenty. After he died, men began to worship him as a god, bringing him offerings of gold and other precious metals to ensure that their peace and prosperity continued. Subsequent kings of Sweden took the title Yngvi after him, and their descendants were known as the *Ynglingar*. Saxo confirms this connection when he says: "The most valiant of the Swedes were ...kinsmen of the divine Frø and faithful accessories of the gods," stating more clearly that they "traced the origin of their race from the god Frø."<sup>17</sup> In *Ynglingasaga*, the earliest successors of Yngvi-Freyr, like Freyr himself, are clearly mythical figures.<sup>18</sup>

Freyr was the chief god of the Swedes, and as such they called him *Veraldar goð*, "the god of the world" (*Ynglingasaga* 10). Styrmir Kárason (d. 1245) names Odin as the god of the Germans, Thor as the god of the English, and Freyr as the god of the Swedes.<sup>19</sup> According to Snorri, Freyr was once a human king to whom the Swedes attributed a long period of good harvests, calling it "Froði's peace" (*Fróða friðr*). In *Skáldskaparmál* 43, Snorri provides an alternative account, attributing this peace instead to the birth of Christ in the reign of King Frodi Fridleifsson, corresponding to the reign of emperor Augustus. Since Frodi was the greatest king in the northern countries, Snorri says that the Scandinavians naturally attributed this peace to him. Snorri informs us that Frodi owned a mill named Grotti which ground out gold, peace, and prosperity for his people. In *Lokasenna* 44, Freyr's servant Byggvir, whose name means 'barley,' is said to ever be "chattering under the mill," (*und kvernom klaka*). He threatens to grind Loki limb by limb to which Loki retorts that Byggvir never knew how to measure out meal to men

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<sup>17</sup> Book 8, Fisher translation, p. 240.

<sup>18</sup> Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 168, citing *Flateyjarbók* III, 246.

evenly (*þú kunnir aldregi deila með mönnum mat*, v. 46).<sup>20</sup> In Saxo's histories, several kings are named Frodi, and many of their stories contain elements of Freyr's mythology, leaving no doubt that Freyr and Frodi are one.

The cult of Freyr and Freyja may be inferred by the use of proper names and poetic epithets among the Germanic people. The name Freyr means "lord," just as Freyja means "woman, lady." Snorri says that noble ladies are known as *fróvur*, after her name (*Gylfaginning* 23). In skaldic verses preserved in Icelandic sagas, women are designated in kennings as *fægi-freyja*, *snyrti-freyja*, *sör-freyja* and valkyries as *val-freyja*.<sup>21</sup> In prose, women are referred to as *húsfreyja*. Among the Goths, personal names include Fráuja, Froia, and Froila. In Old High German we find Frewilo, and among the Anglo-Saxons Wuscfreá, alluding to Freyr.<sup>22</sup> In *Skírnismál* 2, Freyr is given the epithet *inn fróði*, which means not only "the fruitful," but also "the wise."<sup>23</sup> This suggests that the proper names Freyr and Fróði may have started out as titles or descriptive designations for this god.<sup>24</sup> In *Lokasenna* 43, as well as in *Saga Ólafs Konungs hins Helga*, Freyr is designated Ingunar-Freyr. The kings of Sweden, who are said to be descendants of Freyr and known collectively as the Ynglingar, can each be called Yngvi after him. Because of this, one scholar plausibly suggested that the god's full name and title may have once been *Yngvi-Freyr-inn-Fróði*, Lord Yngvi the fruitful.<sup>25</sup> In Anglo-Saxon sources, Yngvi corresponds to Ing. In the Old English rune poem, Ing is said to have first appeared among the East Danes, driving a wagon, which has been compared to the cult vehicle driven by Freyr.<sup>26</sup> In *Beowulf*, the king of the Danes is called *Frea Ingwina* (1319), a name which can mean "Lord and friend of Ing." Grimm notes that men who stood nearer to the gods by services and veneration, particularly priests, are entitled to the designation "friend of the god," a phenomena which continued into the Christian era.<sup>27</sup> In *Sigurðrkviða i skamma* 24, the hero Sigurd is designated as *Freys vinr*, Freyr's friend.<sup>28</sup> We find the same term

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<sup>20</sup> Ursula Dronke, *Poetic Edda, Vol. II*, p. 367 relates this story to *Ynglingasaga*, ch. 18, where King Dag, who could understand the chatter of birds, owned a sparrow that flew over various countries returned to him with news. Once, when the bird did not return, he sacrificed a boar to Freyr to learn the cause. He discovered that the sparrow had been feeding in a foreign farmer's field. The farmer had thrown a stone, killing the bird. King Dag sent an army to avenge his loss, but a thrall fleeing the army flung a pitchfork backward, striking and killing the king. Dronke recognizes Dag as a Frey-figure, likening the twin prongs of the pitchfork to boar's tusks, and the sparrow to Freyr's servant, Byggvir *chattering* beneath the millstone, noting that the verb *klaka* is used primarily of bird-speech.

<sup>21</sup> Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, s.v. *Freyja*. (Sources: Kormak's Saga, Njal's Saga, and Gisli Sursson's Saga)

<sup>22</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p. 211.

<sup>23</sup> Ursula Dronke, *Poetic Edda, Vol. II*, p.404-405 remarks: "I am convinced by the small but sufficient evidence that a double sense is intended here, a play on (a) *fróðr*, 'wise,' and (b) *fróðr*, 'fecund.' *Fróðr* (b) I see reflected in the name Fróði for Freyr's alter ego, the wealthy and peace-blessed king. ...King Fróði cannot have been named for wisdom when he lost the Golden Mill through his folly (*Grottasöngur*)."

<sup>24</sup> Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>26</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 173.

<sup>27</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> The verse says that Gudrun slept beside Sigurd, free of care, but awoke of joy bereft, when she discovered she was swimming in the blood of "Freyr's friend," i.e. her lover Sigurd's blood. Carolyne Larrington translates this inexactly as "when she found herself swimming in her lover's blood." (*The Poetic Edda*, p. 185).

compounded in the Anglo-Saxon expression *freáwine folca*,<sup>29</sup> generally used to designate heroes and kings, is thought to mean “lord and friend of the people,” (*Beowulf* ll. 430, 2357, 2429). The royal pedigrees of Wessex contain a Freáwine, whom Saxo calls Frowinus, and Old High German documents preserve the proper name Frówin, where it frequently occurs in noble families — all of which can be understood as forms of *Freys vinr*.<sup>30</sup>

Together with Odin and Thor, Freyr is the most prominent god of the Viking era. Traditional research has stressed his virility, but this supposition rests on the assumption that an agricultural society required a god of fertility, to the exclusion of his other traits. He is not merely the fertility god of a farming population, but possesses all of the prerequisites of an ideal king: virility, military prowess, and wealth, the attributes required to obtain and keep a throne.<sup>31</sup> The ability to guarantee the fertility of the land was an important quality of early Scandinavian rulers. As Freyr was lord of the harvest, the Swedes believed that the success or the failure of crops depended on their king and his relationship to the gods. *Ynglingasaga* 15 preserves the fate of the Yngling king Domaldi, under whom the crops failed year after year and famine ensued. The first year, the Swedes sacrificed oxen, the next they sacrificed humans, but still the crops did not improve. In the third year, they gathered in great numbers at Uppsala, where their chieftains held counsel. There they determined that the king himself was to blame and so they sacrificed him as a gift to the gods, ending the famine. Similarly, one of the later Ynglingar, Ólaf *Trételga* (the Wood-cutter) was burnt in his home as a sacrifice to Odin after the land he had cleared failed to support the large influx of people who followed. As Snorri says, “the Swedes were wont to attribute to their king good seasons or bad,” although those among them that were wiser, attributed the famine to the fact that the inhabitants were too numerous for the land to support.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the coming of a new religion, tradition prevailed in times of hardship. After the efforts of Harald Fairhair (880-930 AD) to Christianize the country, Norway returned to paganism under the rule of his son Hakon Jarl (936-60 AD). According to the history of the Norwegian kings found in the *Fagrskinna* “the sons of Eiríkr destroyed the rituals, but Hákon reestablished them.”<sup>33</sup> He performed sacrifices more aggressively than before, with the result that grain and herring became more plentiful and the seasons more propitious. Under his reign, honoring the old gods, the earth blossomed. The poet Einar Skálaglamm remarks that “in the world there was never one who spread such peace, except Frodi.” As to Freyr himself, peace and plenty were also attributed to his heirs and descendants. Such pagan beliefs held political clout even after the introduction of Christianity. Ólaf Eiríksson’s son, Jákob, was required to change his name to Anund (Önund) when he assumed the throne, because Jákob was not considered an appropriate name for a king of the Swedes. According to *Heimskringla*, *Ólafs Saga Helga*, ch. 88, “this name ill-pleased the Swedes,” as “no Swedish king had borne that name.”<sup>34</sup> At an assembly of the Upland Swedes, one Freyvith (Freyviðr) made this impassioned plea:

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<sup>29</sup> J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1960.

<sup>30</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p. 211.

<sup>31</sup> Murdoch and Read, *ibid*, p. 89.

<sup>32</sup> Hollander, *ibid*, p. 44-45

<sup>33</sup> Alison Finlay, *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway, A Translation with Introduction and Notes*, Brill, 2004, Ch. 16, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Hollander tr., Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, History of the Kings of Norway*, 1964, p. 332.

“We Uppland Swedes do not wish that in our days the crown go from the line of the ancestors of our ancient kings while there is such good choice as we have. King Ólaf has two sons, and we desire one of them to be king. But there is a great difference between them. The one is born in wedlock and of Swedish races on both sides whereas the other is the son of a servant woman herself half Wendish”

The text continues:

“This opinion was received with loud acclaim and all wanted Jákob for king. ...Thereupon, the brothers Freywith and Arnvith had the king’s son, Jákob brought before the assembly and had him given the title of king. At the same time, the Swedes gave him the name Önund, and that name he bore until his death. At the time he was ten or twelve years old. Then king Önund chose for himself followers and chieftains to have about him, and all of them together had as great a force as he considered needful. Then he gave *the assembled farmers* leave to return to their homes.”<sup>35</sup>

The Scandinavians referred to their religion as *forn seð*, the old custom, and their conversion to Christianity as a change in customs, *siðaskipti*. This linguistic insight allows us to see the heathen religion as a set of social conventions, hallowed by age and derived from mythic antecedents.<sup>36</sup> In this context, the rejection of the name Jákob by the Swedish farmers, can be interpreted as a rejection of the new faith. The name of one of Christ’s disciples was not acceptable to the pagan people as a name for their king. The same source states that King Ólaf had sent his other son Emund to Wendland where he was brought up by kinfolk on his mother’s side, adding he did not maintain his Christianity for any length of time.<sup>37</sup> In *Völundarkviða* 2, the name Anund (Önund) is used as a byname of Völund the elf-smith. In verses 16 and 18 of the same poem, Völund is characterized as a “prince of the elves.” In *Grimnismál* 5, elves are closely associated with Freyr, who is given their realm Alfheim upon cutting his first tooth. That a Swedish king was required to carry a name derived from heathen lore associated with Freyr rather than the name of one of the Apostles demonstrates that heathenism remained a political force in Sweden even after the conversion. The Swedes themselves became pagan once more after the death of King Ólaf, and remained pagan longer than in Iceland, which adopted the new religion peaceably, but reluctantly, in 1000 AD.

Regarding King Ólaf Haraldsson, *Ólafs Saga Helga*, ch. 106 in the *Flateyjarbók* informs us that his contemporaries believed that he was the ancient king Ólaf Geirstadaalf reborn. The king, it adds, knew this but labeled it heathen superstition. Ólaf Geirstadaalf was reputed to be the uncle of Harald Fairhair, a descendant of the Ynglings and the first king to unify Norway. The story of Ólaf Geirstadaalf, as found in the *Flateyjarbók* says that he ruled in two counties, Upsi and Vestmar. His throne was in Geirstadir in Vestfold. According to the *Fornaldarsaga* known as *Af Upplendinga Konungum*. (“Of the Kings of Uppland”), he was unusually large, strong, and handsome in appearance. It is said that he defended his kingdom bravely against foes, and that under

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<sup>35</sup> Hollander, *ibid*, p. 349.

<sup>36</sup> *Early Germanic Literature and Culture*, Volume 1 (2004), Edited by Brian Murdoch and Malcolm Read, p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> Hollander, *ibid*, p. 332.

his leadership, good harvests and peace, for the most part, prevailed so that the people multiplied greatly. Yet, once he was troubled by a worrisome dream. Before an assembly gathered for this purpose, King Ólaf revealed that he had dreamed that a big, black ox from the east traveled around his entire country, killing so many people with its noxious breath that those who died were as numerous as those that survived. The ox even killed him and his retinue. Ólaf interpreted the dream for them, saying: “Long has peace reigned in this kingdom and good harvests, but the population is now greater than the land can bear. The ox means that a plague will come to the country from the east and cause many deaths. My retinue will also die of it and even I, myself.” He requested that the people not sacrifice to him after his death. In time, King Ólaf’s dream came true. The people laid him in a mound with many treasures, and later, when bad harvests came, the people sacrificed to him, despite his prohibition, and called him *Geirstada-alf* (“the elf of Geirstad”). This story, told in the *Flateyjarbók*, is associated with a verse in *Ynglingatal*,<sup>38</sup> occurring in variants in the *Flateyjarbók* and *Heimskringla*. These stories of Ólaf the elf were not written later than 1200, and thus are among the older stories of St. Ólaf in existence.<sup>39</sup> They contain remarkable parallels to the cult of Freyr.

Details concerning Freyr’s cult can be gathered from such diverse sources as Adam of Bremen’s 9<sup>th</sup> century *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus, and the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic narratives. Near the end of the ninth century, German cleric Adam of Bremen describes the temple at Uppsala, as housing three idols, those of the gods Wodan (Odin), Thunar (Thor), and Fricco (Freyr). The same trinity can be seen in *Skirnismál* 33, which invokes Odin, Ásabragr (Thor), and Freyr. According to Adam, Wotan (which he translates as “the Furious”), carried on war and imparted strength to man; Thunar presided over the air, governing thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops; while the third god, Fricco bestowed peace and pleasure on mortals. To each of these gods were appointed priests to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. If plague and famine threatened, a libation was poured out to the god Thunar; if war was imminent, to Wotan; if marriages were to be celebrated, to Fricco.<sup>40</sup> Fricco, whose name is a masculine counterpart of Frigg, the name of Odin’s wife, is usually identified as Freyr or a closely related god.<sup>41</sup> Saxo says that the sacrifices dedicated to Freyr at Uppsala were accompanied by effeminate gestures, the clapping of mimes on stage, and the unmanly tinkling of bells.<sup>42</sup> According to Adam of Bremen, his image was equipped with an immense phallus, a symbol consistent with what we know of Freyr. Based on the strength of this evidence, a small statue found on the farm Rällinge in Lunda parish, Sweden in 1904 depicting a seated man with an erect penis has been identified as Freyr. Wearing a pointed cap, he is seated with his legs crossed, stroking his beard. The statue, measuring nine centimeters tall, is currently on display at the Swedish Museum of National Antiquities. Numerous anthropomorphic figures of various sizes, carved from tree branches, have also been discovered. In a sacrificial bog in Oberdorla in Thuringia,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ynglingasaga*, ch. 49.

<sup>39</sup> Turville-Petre, p. 194.

<sup>40</sup> *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, chs. 26 and 27.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Orton, “Pagan Myth and Religion”, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk, p. 305.

<sup>42</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Book 6.



several crude wooden idols were found. Some of these figures are clearly female, such as a three meter figure from Forlev Nymølle on Jutland, which is little more than a forked tree branch with a slit cut to represent a vulva, and the obviously male figure from Broddenbjerg on Jutland, with one branch forming an oversized erect penis.<sup>43</sup> One figure found in the context of a weapon sacrifice in Ejsbøl on Jutland is thought to represent the god to whom the sacrifice was devoted. These wooden figures are sometimes found in male-female pairs, as in the tall, well carved figures from Braak near Eutin in Schleswig-Holstein, dating to the early Iron Age, and thus may represent Freyr and Freyja. The *Lanercost Chronicle*, a northern English and Scottish history covering the years 1201 to 1346, reports the following for the year 1268:

"During this year in Laodonia, a pestilence, which is traditionally called 'Affliction of the Lungs,' which could be fierce, ran riot in animal herds, [and] monks in dress but not in spirit taught the uneducated men of the country to raise up a friction-fire of wood, and set up the likeness of Priapus and through this rescue the cattle."<sup>44</sup>

Like Freyr, Priapus was a fertility deity depicted with an erection by the Romans. His appearance in northern England in the 13<sup>th</sup> century is best explained as an *interpretio Romana* of a native god.

The notion that Freyr's idols possessed procreative power is emphasized in a 14<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic story found in the *Flateyjarbók*. *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings* tells the tale of a young Norwegian named Gunnar, falsely accused of murder, who flees to Sweden where he encounters a young woman said to be the wife of the god Freyr. He joins the woman, probably a priestess, as she rides through the countryside in a wagon near the end of the year accompanied by a wooden idol representing the god. Caught in a snowstorm, Gunnar enters the wagon offending the god and a struggle ensues. Calling on the Christian god for support, Gunnar displaces the idol, causing Freyr to flee. Later, when the priestess turns up pregnant with Gunnar's child, the people regard this as a sign of the god's potency. Although late, the story appears to confirm some aspects of an older tradition.<sup>45</sup> This story is most often compared with that of Nerthus (Tacitus, *Germania*, ch. 40), who also drives through the countryside in a wagon accompanied by priests of the opposite sex. Archeological finds confirm the existence of such ceremonial vehicles, most notably the intricately carved wagon recovered from the 9<sup>th</sup> century ship burial at Oseberg. Einhard, the biographer of Charlemagne, says that Childeric III, the last of the long-haired Merovingian kings, annually proceeded to the public assembly in a two-wheeled carriage drawn by yoked oxen, driven by a cowherd in 'rustic style.'<sup>46</sup> Given its ceremonial status, Childeric's ox-cart procession may belong to Merovingian tradition. Stuart Piggot has suggested that this royal procession had its origin in the wagon-tour of Nerthus, as the Franks had come south from the archeological

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<sup>43</sup> *Early Germanic Literature and Culture*, Volume 1, Edited by Brian Murdoch and Malcolm Read (2004), "Germanic Religion and the Conversion to Christianity" by Rudolf Simek, pp. 73-101; p.78.

<sup>44</sup> Carla O'Harris translation; *cum hoc anno in Laodonia pestis grassaretur in pecudes armenti, quam vocant usitate Lungessouth, quidam bestiales, habitu claustrales non animo, docebant idiotas patriae ignem confrictione di lignes educere et simulachrum Priapi statuere, et per haec bestus succurrere.*

<sup>45</sup> Orton, *ibid*, p. 304-305.

<sup>46</sup> *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. Pertz and Waitz, p. 3, cited by Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, p. 47.

areas which yielded ceremonial four-wheeled wagons in votive bog-finds, such as Dejbjerg and Husby.<sup>47</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill believes that the bull-drawn cart could be a reference to the Quinotaur, a mythical beast mentioned in the 7th century Chronicle of Fredegar. It was held to have fathered Meroveus, founder of the Merovingians, after ravishing the wife of the Frankish king Choldio. Described as *bestea Neptuni Quinotauri similis*, “Neptune’s beast that looks like a Quinotaur,” its name translates from Latin as “bull with five horns.” The origin of the legend is unknown, and may derive from native Frankish mythology. The association of a bull and the sea, which has parallels in other Indo-European mythologies, once again points to the cult of the Vanir, headed by the sea-god Njörd.

In the *Flateyjarbók* tale, Freyr is called *blótguð svía*, the “sacrificial god of the Swedes.”<sup>48</sup> In *Ynglingasaga* 4, a euhemerized Odin appoints Njörd and Freyr as *blótgoða* (sacrificial priests) among the Aesir. Njörd’s daughter, Freyja, is their *blótgyðja* (sacrificial priestess). Germanic bogs have yielded numerous examples of sacrificial animals, mainly horses, cattle, and sheep, all showing signs of ritual slaughter.<sup>49</sup> In the first book of Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*, the hero Hadding institutes the annual festival known as the *Frøblot*, Frø being the Danish equivalent of Freyr,<sup>50</sup> in which only “dark-colored” (*furvis*) victims were sacrificed,<sup>51</sup> recalling the black ox of Ólaf Geirstadaalf’s dream. The color black, commonly associated with death or evil in Christian iconography, was the color of fertility and the soil in Old Europe.<sup>52</sup> In *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgóða*, Freyr’s priest Hrafnkel dedicates half of all his best livestock to the god (ch. 2). His most valuable animal was a dun stallion with a dark tail and mane, and a dark stripe down its back (ch. 3). He loved this horse so much that he dedicated half of it to Freyr, naming it Freyfaxi, and swearing a solemn oath to kill anyone who ever mounted the stallion, and oath which ultimately proves his undoing. In *Vatnsdæla Saga*, ch. 34, another horse named Freyfaxi appears, this one with a “colored mane.” In *Víga-Glum’s Saga*, ch. 9, a man named Thorkel goes to Freyr’s temple and offers the god an ox. In *Brandkrossa þáttur*, ch. 1, a farmer kills and cooks a bull, dedicating the entire feast to Freyr. In *Hyndluljóð*, Ottar reddens the Freyja’s altar with ox blood (*nauta blóði*). Since Freyr is reckoned among the names of oxen,<sup>53</sup> one scholar suggests the possibility that Freyr and Freyja were worshipped in the form of a bull and a cow.<sup>54</sup> In this light, we might suspect that the third god named in the *Saxon Baptismal Vow* was Freyr, as the name may mean “Bull of the Saxons” (*sæx-naut*).<sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Waggon, Chariot and Carriage: Symbol and Status in the History of Transport (1992), p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> I, 339, cited by Turville-Petre, p. 173.

<sup>49</sup> Murdoch and Read, *ibid*, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes, Books I-IX*, Hilda Ellis Davidson, Edition and Commentary. Peter Fisher translation., 1979-80, Commentary on the Text, p. 34, n. 56

<sup>51</sup> Saxo, Book 1: “For, in order to appease the deities, he sacrificed dusky victims to the god Freyr. This manner of propitiation by sacrifice he repeated as an annual feast, and left posterity to follow. This rite the Swedes call Frøblod (the sacrifice or feast of Freyr).” Elton tr.

<sup>52</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> *Nafnapula* 89, Edda, Anthony Faulkes tr., p. 163.

<sup>54</sup> Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 256.

<sup>55</sup> Vatican Codex pal. 577: *Ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and uuordum, Thunaer ende Uuöden ende Saxnote ende allum them unholdum the hira genötas sint* (“I renounce all the words and works of the devil, Thunear, Wöden and Saxnöt, and all those fiends that are their associates.”).

Horses are also used for sacrifice, and their flesh, particularly the liver, was eaten.<sup>56</sup> Remains of horse sacrifices at Rislev on Zealand are limited to the skulls, lower legs and tails, a type of sacrifice also documented in Vestervig (Jutland) and Sorte Muld (Bornholm).<sup>57</sup> It seems likely that most of the meat of the horse, ritually slaughtered with a blow to the forehead, was eaten in a communal feast. In *Hrafnkel's Saga*, after Freyr's priest is conquered, the horse Freyfaxi is driven over a cliff into a pool below, as "it is only fitting that he who owns him should take him." To accomplish this, the people pull a leather sack over its head, set stout poles beneath its flanks, and tie a stone around its neck. This tale is supported by Norwegian traditions, and therefore may be regarded as a travesty of a sacrifice to Freyr.<sup>58</sup> It is widely reported that heathens ate horse-flesh, a practice which probably had religious significance, as a number of Christian edicts roundly condemn it. Upon their conversion, the Icelanders are exempted from this ban.<sup>59</sup> Freyr's association with both the horse and an immense phallus may further connect him to another tale known found in the *Flatneyjarbók* as *Völsa þáttur*, a chapter in *Ólafs saga Helga*. *Völsa þáttur* says that once, when a farmer's son was skinning a horse for its meat, he took up the animal's severed member and brought it home as a prank. Rather than taking it as a joke, his mother dried it carefully, wrapped it in linen along with leeks and other herbs to prevent it from rotting, and then placed it in her coffer, naming it Völsi.<sup>60</sup> Every evening afterwards, she retrieved it and addressed it with prayers, believing it to be her god. She forced the rest of the household to accept this, passing it around the table each night, expecting them each to recite a verse over it. In time, the thing grew and became so strong that it could stand erect by the old woman's side when she wanted it to. When the missionary king Ólaf Tyvvgesson came to call, he threw Völsi to the family's dog and converted the family to the new faith. The word for dog here, *hundurinn*, means "bitch" and thus may refer back to Hjalti's *nið*-verse directed at Freyja.<sup>61</sup> The literary sources examined above generally show contempt for heathen practices, mocking Vanic rites by members of the more prudish Christian faith.

Other Icelandic sources refer to the cult of Freyr. *Íslendingabók*, the oldest Icelandic source to mention Freyr (c. 1125 AD) includes him in a genealogy of Swedish kings. *Landnámabók* preserves a heathen oath invoking Freyr, Njörðr and "the almighty áss" (Thor) to be sworn at the Althing. *Hervarar Saga* refers to a boar sacrifice performed in the name of Freyr at Yule. *Vatnsdæla Saga*, ch. 10 speaks of a silver amulet on which the image of Freyr is carved. In *Gísla Saga Súrssonar* when a chieftain named Þorgrímr Freysgoði died and was buried in a howe, a strange thing happened: no snow ever lodged on the south side of the howe, nor did it freeze. Similarly *Víga-Glúm's Saga* says that a temple of Freyr stands near the farm *Þvéra*. The property includes a field

<sup>56</sup> *Heimskringla, Hákonar Saga Góða*, ch. 18.

<sup>57</sup> Murdoch and Read, *ibid*, p. 77, citing Michael Müller-Wille, *Opferkulte der Germanen und Slaven*, 1999, p. 32-33.

<sup>58</sup> Turville-Petre, *ibid.*, p. 254 citing A. Liestøl, *Maal og Minne*, 37, 1945, pp. 59-66; and K.Liestøl, *Arv*, II, 1946, pp. 94-110.

<sup>59</sup> Murdoch Read, *ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>60</sup> Probably derived from *völr*, 'staff,' according to E.O. G. Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 317.

<sup>61</sup> In *Hyndluljóð*, Freyja confronts a sorceress named Hyndla, whose name also means "bitch." This may be more than figurative, as it reminds us of Hjalti Skeggjasson's couplet (McKinnell, *ibid*, p. 87). In European folklore, howling dogs are often a harbinger of death, and sometimes seen as the companion of divine figures such as Frau Holle and Nehalennia. (Gimbutas, *ibid*, p. 197).

called *Vitazgjafi* [Sure-giver], which never fell barren. Although it is not directly stated in the saga, most scholars assume that Freyr was responsible for the fertility of this field.<sup>62</sup> In *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings*, the idol of Freyr is said to provide *arbót*, “help with the crops,” as it travels the land. Similarly, Freyr himself is called *árguð* in *Skáldskaparmál* 14.

Successful agriculture depends on peace, but from this one should not regard Vanir as pacifists. In *Völuspá* 24, the Vanir are said to have conquered the Aesir in war. They broke through the wall of Asgard and took the plain through *vigspá*, a war-charm. Like his sister Freyja, Freyr is associated with war. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri informs us that Freyr personally slew the giant Beli, armed only with a stag’s horn. He once carried a sword which he gave to his servant Skirnir as a gift for Gerd. (*Lokasenna* 42). Nevertheless, he takes an active role in the battle of Ragnarök, boldly facing Surt. Only then will he regret the loss of this weapon. In a verse by Einar skálaglamm, concerning the death of Haraldr Eiríksson at the hands of Jarl Hákon, the poet characterizes a warrior as a “Freyr (god) of the war-ski (sword),” (*folkskiðs Freyr*).<sup>63</sup> In *Skírnismál* 3, Freyr himself is designated as *folkvaldi goða*, “field-marshal of the gods.”<sup>64</sup> In *Húsdrápa*, he is called “battle-skilled” (*böðfróðr*) and said to rule armies (*folkum stýrir*).<sup>65</sup> In *Lokasenna* 35, he is *ása jaðarr*, “protector of the Aesir.”<sup>66</sup> He is once designated as *Atriði*, a name probably indicating one who rides to war<sup>67</sup> and his horse is named *Blóðughófa*, “Bloody-hoof,” an appropriate name for a war-horse.<sup>68</sup> Freyr himself is said to be the “boldest of riders.” (*Lokasenna* 37).

Freyr’s main attributes are the boar and the ship, both symbols prevalent in Northern European iconography. According to *Skáldskaparmál* 35, both are gifts to him from the primeval smiths. The Sons of Ivaldi gave Freyr the wondrous ship *Skidbladnir*, a fact confirmed by *Grimnismál* 43, while the artisans Brokk and Sindri give Freyr the golden boar called *Gullinbursti* or *Slidrugtanni*. According to the account in the *Younger Edda*, *Gullinbursti* (“Golden Bristles”) can run across sea and sky by day or night faster than any horse. Its golden bristles radiate such brilliance that it was never dark wherever it went. Freyr rode this boar to Baldur’s cremation.<sup>69</sup> Freyja, characterized by feminine traits, appears to share her brother’s symbols. She also rides 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). In *Grimnismál*, we learn that the heroes of *Valhalla*, the *Einherjar*, are fed on the meat of an ever-renewing boar, *Saehrimnir* (v. 18). Snorri informs us that “there will never be such a large number in

<sup>62</sup> *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources* by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, translated by Terry Gunnell and Joan Turville-Petre, 1998, p. 89.

<sup>63</sup> Alison Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> Ursula Dronke tr.; In Anglo-Saxon poetry this designation is used as a proper name, *Finn Folkvalding*, perhaps alluding to elves, as elves are often equated with Finns in late Scandinavian sources (cp. the prose introduction to *Völundarkviða*).

<sup>65</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* 7.

<sup>66</sup> Beatrice Lafarge and John Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda*, s.v. *iaðarr*.

<sup>67</sup> “*som rider frem til kamp*”, *Lexicon Poeticum*, s.v. *Atriði*.

<sup>68</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*

<sup>69</sup> A verse from *Húsdrápa* by Ulf Uggason, quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* 8, Faulkes tr.

Valhall 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). 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 her love for Ottar as “ever running out at night, like Heidrun among the he-goats” (v. 48). 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 Freyja’s lover represented in the shape of a boar, but among her many epithets we find *Sýr*, which means sow, invoking the image of a mother pig. In Icelandic documents, the same name is used as an epithet for a king. St. Olaf’s stepfather, King Sigurd, a minor king of Hringaríki in Norway mentioned in *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Morkinskinna* was known as *Sigurðr sýr*. The name is also found in the genitive form, *sýrar*, in *Ágrip* 37, and in an eleventh century verse. Scholars, such as Alison Finlay, generally agree that this designation is related to *Sýr*, a poetical name for the goddess Freyja, referring to her association with sows.<sup>70</sup> In *Ólaf Saga Helga*, ch. 33, when Olaf comes to visit *Sigurðr sýr*, seeking his aid in gaining the entire kingdom of Norway, he finds his stepfather hard at work in the fields. He was there with many men. Some cutting the grain, some binding it in sheaves, and some carting the grain to the barn. What the saga says of *Sigurðr sýr* is reminiscent of the legendary King Frodi, who is probably identical with Freyr himself. He was one of the wisest men living in Norway and rich in cattle. He had a peaceful disposition and was not aggressive. He was a hard worker and a good husbandman, who managed his property and farm, attending to household matters himself. The warlike Olaf and his mother, Sigurð’s wife Asta, despised him for this. After Sigurd’s death, Olaf asked his young stepbrothers, Sigurd’s sons, each what they wanted most. The first two wanted to own big farms like their father’s. The youngest son Harald, however, declared that he wanted housecarls, so many that they would eat up all of his brothers’ cows. At this Olaf laughed and told his mother that she was raising a king. In time, the young son became *Haraldr harðráði*, the king of Norway from 1047-1066 AD. *Morkinskinna* reveals that Harald grew angry when reminded of his father’s name. These references have puzzled scholars. Once, at a drinking party, Harald insulted the brother of King Magnus, telling him that he had heard his father was a *hvinngestr* (a thief-guest). His brother was advised to reply:

*Gerði eigi sá garð of hestredr  
sem Sigurð sýr sá vas þinn faðir.*

“He never sheathed the phallus of a horse,  
Like *Sigurð sýr*: he was your father.”<sup>71</sup>

The insult is thought to be based on a comparison between Sigurd and a female animal, as any real or implied comparison of a man with a female animal was considered a *nið* (slander) and was subject to full outlawry.<sup>72</sup> The incongruity of the comparison, pairing a female sow with a male horse, however, is obvious. In light of Freyr’s

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<sup>70</sup> Alison Finlay, *Fagrkinna*, p. 145.

<sup>71</sup> *Morkinskinna*, ch. 19, translated by Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, (2000), p. 162.

<sup>72</sup> Andersson and Gade, *ibid*, p. 433.

connection to the horse, and the independent tale of Völsi, might this be another cult reference? In a humorous tale called *Hreiðárs þátr*, found in *Morkinskinna* ch. 24, a young man named *Hreiðar heimski* (Hreidar the simple), whom Harald wished to kill, presented *Haraldr harðráði* with small pig made of gilded silver. After the king examined the gift and had passed it among his men, Harald praised Hreidar's workmanship and granted him reconciliation. But when the gift circulated back to the king and he got a second look at it, Harald now realized that the gilded pig had teats—it was not a boar but a sow, and he grew angry, throwing it down, and again calling for the young man's death. Hreidar escaped with the gift and his life to the court of King Magnus, who also praised its workmanship, adding "Harald has avenged much lesser mockeries than this." Anthony Faulkes was puzzled by the nature of the insult.<sup>73</sup> Hilda Davidson, however, believes that the insult lay in the fact that Harald's father, *Sigurð sýr*, was not a warrior king serving Odin, but instead a worshipper of Freyja, incorporating her name into his own.<sup>74</sup> Of the same passage, Britt-Mari Nässtrom,<sup>75</sup> writes:

"The most appealing etymology, however, derives from the IE stem \*s(w)er- meaning 'to protect,' 'to shield.' During the course of time the word lost its original meaning and became interpreted as the homonymous 'sow' (Schrodt 1979:114-119). However, the double-meaning of the word was used in *Ólavs saga helga*, where Ólav's foster-father, Sigurþ, carries the by-name Sýr. (Snorri/Aðalbjarnarson 1951: 7). It is hard to believe that a man in his position would accept being called 'the sow' by his subjects. But in *Hreiðars þátr* we find the other meaning of the name, when the enemies make a pun on it and present him with an amulet in the form of a silver pig, which raised his anger. (*Hreiðars þátr*/Sigfússon 1945: 254). The pun is thus the evidence of the fact that *sýr* carried two meanings, especially since we find the name in kennings like *sarlaxa Sýr* and *Folk Sýr*, used in positive senses (Egilsson 1966: 557). Likewise when a goddess like Freyja is called Sýr it is preferable to choose the archaic alternative. However, there is an affinity between the boar and the twin couple Freyr and Freyja, in relation to their warlike characters rather than to the aspect of fertility (Davidson 1964: 98-9)."

An association with the cult of the Vanir would appear to be confirmed by the vivid description of Sigurd as a farmer king in *Heimskringla* and his son Harald's anger when reminded of his father's nickname in *Morkinskinna*.

As early as 98 AD, we find evidence of the religious significance of the boar among northern Germanic tribes. In *Germania* 45, Tacitus speaks of 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."

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<sup>73</sup> Anthony Faulkes, *Two Icelandic Stories: Hreiðars Þátr and Orms Þátr*, 1967, p. 92.

<sup>74</sup> *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 87-88.

<sup>75</sup> "Freyja—A Goddess with Many Names" in *The Concept of the Goddess*, edited by Sandra Billington and Miranda Green.

Tacitus adds that “they cultivate grain and other crops more patiently than one might expect from the indolence typical of Germani.”<sup>76</sup> We just find such emblems adorning battle-gear in medieval northern Europe and these archeological relics are further supported by contemporary literary references. In *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga*, *Hildsvín* (battle-swine) and *Hildigöltr* (battle-boar) are the names of helmets. In 12th century England the poet Cynewulf speaks of *eoforcumble*, “boar-crested,” helmets (*Elene* 76, 260). Similarly, the *Beowulf* poet refers to “boar figures” which “gleamed over plated check-guards, inlaid with gold,” (*eoforlic scionon ofer hleorberan gehroden golde*, 303-305), “the boar’s head standard, high-crowned helmet” (*het ða in beran eafor-heafod-segn, headosteapne helm*, 2152-2155),<sup>77</sup> “the pig atop the helmet” (*swin ofer helme*, 1286), and a magnificent helmet with its “boar-plates” (*swinlicum*, 1453). In *Beowulf*, part of the armor placed on Hnaef’s funeral pyre is a *swyn ealgylden, eofer irenheard*, “a pig all-golden, an iron-hard boar.”<sup>78</sup> In medieval Germany and Scandinavia, animals were traditionally slaughtered when winter set in, and thus may have retained elements of heathen sacrifice. Throughout northern Europe, a boar’s head was a show dish presented on festive occasions.<sup>79</sup> At Oxford, a boar’s head was exhibited on Christmas Day and carried around solemnly, accompanied by singing. In Thuringia, whoever abstains from eating until suppertime on Christmas Eve, it is believed, will catch sight of a golden boar. A Lauterbach *weisthum* (ordinance) of 1589 requires all farmsteads to furnish a *goldferch* (a gold-hog), gelded before it is weaned for the feast on Three Kings Day, therefore at Yule. The price of the hog was set at seven shillings which agrees with the price of the hogs specially fattened according to a similar ordinance and slaughtered at Vinkbuch in the Alamann country at the beginning of the harvest and distributed among the community.<sup>80</sup> In Frankish and Alamannic documents the word *ferch*, glossed as *porcellus* in Latin, means “little pig.” In Old High German, it refers to a sacrificial victim, glossing Latin *hostia*, *victima*, *halocaustum*. The Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hjörvardsson* tells a related story in the prose after verse 30. One Yule evening, a sacrificial boar (*sónargöltr*) was led out, and the men gathered there placed their hands on it, making vows with the pledging cup (*bragarfulli*). *Hervarar saga og Heiðreks*, ch. 10, records what may be the heathen roots of these traditions:

“King Heithrek worshipped Freyr, and he used to give Freyr the biggest boar he could find. They regarded it as so sacred that in all important cases they used to take the oath on its bristles. It was the custom to sacrifice the boar at the ‘sacrifice of the herd.’ On Yule eve, the ‘boar of the herd’ was led into the hall before the king. Then men laid their hands on his bristles and made solemn vows.”<sup>81</sup>

In the *Nafnapular*, among the names of swine, we find *val-glitnir* (slaughter-shiner) and *val-bassi* (slaughter-bear), as well as *vigrir* (war-like) and *vaningi* (son of the

<sup>76</sup> J.B. Rives, *Tacitus Germania*, p. 96.

<sup>77</sup> Howell Chickering tr.

<sup>78</sup> North, *ibid*, p. 71; *Beowulf*, lines 1111-12.

<sup>79</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p. 215, 1355.

<sup>80</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p. 53.

<sup>81</sup> Translated by Nora Kershaw, *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past*, Cambridge at the University Press, 1921.

Vanir).<sup>82</sup> The name *vaningi*, used of Freyr himself in *Skirnismál* 37, make it difficult to avoid the suspicion that Freyr himself was conceived of as a boar, and that the flesh of the boar consumed at the sacrificial feast was thought to be that of the god himself.<sup>83</sup> Pigs are not only fertile, producing many young, but are fierce fighters which bear tusks, which are likened to weapons. The wild boar is a scavenger and will eat corpses; not surprisingly, it acquired a symbolic association with death.<sup>84</sup> They are also rooting animals, which symbolically connects them with the plow, making them appropriate symbols of the Vanir who once defeated the more powerful Aesir in war (*Völuspá* 23-24). Clearly, there is a close connection between the Vanir gods, death, war, fertility and the symbol of the boar. In Near Eastern and European myths, the boar is a beast which kills the male companion of a fertility goddess—the Egyptian Osiris, husband of the goddess Isis, is killed by Set who is associated with boars; the Babylonian Tammuz was killed by a wild boar, and his wife Ishtar wept for 40 days; Adonis, lover of Aphrodite, is killed by a boar while hunting; the Irish Diarmuid, beloved of Gráinne, daughter of the king of Tara, dies from a boar's wound, after being woken by baying hounds.

The other gift to Freyr, probably also shared by Freyja, was the ship *Skidbladnir*. Called the “best of ships” in *Grimnismál* 44, Snorri informs us that *Skidbladnir* was large enough to hold all the gods and their battle-gear, yet was could be folded up like a napkin and stored in one's pocket when not in use. It always “had a fair wind as soon as its sail was hoisted, wherever it was intended to go,” (*Skáldskaparmál* 35).<sup>85</sup> It was given to him by the Sons of Ivaldi, a group of artisans that *Skáldskaparmál* characterizes as dwarves or dark-elves. In *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 6, Ivaldi himself is designated as an elf, again directly linking the elves to Freyr. Ships played a central role in the prehistoric Germanic religion, figuring prominently in Scandinavian Bronze Age petroglyphs and other pictorial representations of this era such as the Kivik grave.<sup>86</sup> About one hundred tiny bronze and gold leaf ships of uncertain date, some decorated with concentric circles interpreted as solar symbols, were discovered in a clay jar at Nors in North Jutland. Ritual use of these objects seems likely.<sup>87</sup> Besides the ship-burials of Gokstad and Oseberg, hundreds of ship-graves have been found in Norway and Sweden.<sup>88</sup> The ship can be seen as a symbol of both death and fertility. Jacob Grimm first drew attention to an ancient Germanic rite which appears to be connected with this.<sup>89</sup>

About the year 1133, in a forest near Inden (in Ripuaria), a ship, set upon wheels, was built and drawn through the country by *pauper rusticus* (‘country folk’) who were yoked to it. We find a detailed report of this procession in Rodulf's *Chronicon Abbatiae S. Trudonis*, Book XI.<sup>90</sup> Led by a guild of weavers, it traveled first to Aachen (Aix), then to Maestricht, where a mast and sail were added, then up the river to Tongres, Looz and so on, accompanied by crowds of people assembling and escorting it everywhere. In this it resembles the procession of a fertility deity paraded in a wagon throughout the

<sup>82</sup> All translations by Anthony Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 164.

<sup>83</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 255.

<sup>84</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *Language of the Goddess*, p. 195.

<sup>85</sup> Anthony Faulkes, tr.

<sup>86</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, s.v. ship.

<sup>87</sup> Martin L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007) p. 207.

<sup>88</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *ibid*, p. 173

<sup>89</sup> *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. 13, p. 257-262

<sup>90</sup> Reproduced by Grimm in Latin, *Teutonic Mythology*, Stalleybrass tr., pp. 260-262.



countryside, so common in ancient Germanic sources.<sup>91</sup> That it was led by weavers suggests a women's cult. Wherever it stopped, there were joyful shouts, songs of triumph and dancing round the ship far into the night. The approach of the ship procession was announced to towns, which opened their gates through which gathered throngs went out to greet it. Throughout the account everything is put in an odious light; but the narrative derives its full significance from the fact that it was so utterly exasperated the clergy, who tried to suppress it. The ship is described as a *malignorum spirituum simulacrum* ('vehicle of malignant spirits') and a *diaboli ludibrium* ('evil mockery'). It is said to be associated with *infausto omine* ('inauspicious omens') and that *maligni spiritus* ('malignant spirits') travel inside it. The author speculates that it may well be called a ship of "Neptune or Mars, of Bacchus or Venus," clearly connecting it with heathen gods, and therefore it must be burnt or destroyed somehow. It is generally accepted that such cult ships were built on land for the duration of the festival. It is important to note that secular powers, not the clergy, authorized the procession and protected it. It rested within the power of several townships to grant the approaching ship admission.

Traces of similar ship processions at the beginning of spring are found in other parts of Germany, especially in Swabia, which became the seat of the Suebi mentioned by Tacitus. Minutes of the town-council of Ulm, dated St. Nicholas' Eve 1530 contain the prohibition: "There shall be none, by day nor night, trick or disguise him, nor put on any carnival raiment, moreover shall keep him from the going about of the plough and with ships on pain of 1 gulden."<sup>92</sup> No doubt, among the common people of that region, there survived some recollections of ancient heathen worship which had not yet been entirely uprooted. A continuation of the ships on the rock carvings and the ship Skidbladnir is not unlikely.<sup>93</sup> Rodulf does not say what became at last of the *terrea navis* ("earthly ship") but relates how, upon a reception being demanded for it and refused, fights and quarrels broke out, which could only be settled by open warfare. This proves the passion of its contemporaries, fanned to a flame by the participants on either side, both secular and clerical. The ceremony itself has Indo-European analogs, suggesting an ancient origin. The Greeks dedicated a ship to Athena. At the *Panathenaea*, her sacred robe was conveyed by ship to the Acropolis suspended from the mast as a sail. This ship was built on the Kerameikos, and moved on dry land by an unseen mechanism, first around the temple of Demeter and then past the Pelasgian to the Pythian, and finally to the citadel, followed by the people in solemn procession.<sup>94</sup>

Because so many scholars have equated her with Frigg, the earliest evidence for the goddess Freyja is uncertain. The first clear references we have to Freyja, under this name, are the poems of the *Elder Edda*, some of which have been dated as early as 1000 AD, and Snorri's *Edda*, dated to the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars have long debated when the cult of Freyja first appeared. But, in this regard, an important piece of evidence from Tacitus' *Germania* chapter 9 is often overlooked. Several Roman sources attest the veneration of Mercury as the primary god of northern Europe. When the Romans came into contact with foreign people, they commonly gave the foreign concepts

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<sup>91</sup> William Reaves, "Odin's Wife: The Earth Mother in Germanic Mythology"

[www.germanicmythology.com/original/earthmother.html](http://www.germanicmythology.com/original/earthmother.html)

<sup>92</sup> Carl Jäger, *Schwäb. Städtewesen des MA (Middle Ages)*, 1, p. 525, cited by Grimm, *ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>93</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, s.v. Skidbladnir.

<sup>94</sup> *Philostr. De vitis sophist.* Book 2, ch. 1, ed. Paris, 1608 p. 549, cited by Grimm, *ibid.*, p. 265.

they encountered their own names. Thus Roman observers tended to equate the Germanic gods with the gods their own. This was often done for the most superficial reasons. Mercury's hat and staff were so strikingly similar to Odin's hood and spear that these gods were considered identical.<sup>95</sup> Among the Germans, the reverse also occurred making it possible to identify at least one of the Germanic gods, called by a Roman name. In the third or fourth century Anglo-Saxon transliteration of the names of the Roman days of the week, *dies Mercurius* (Mercury's day) is rendered Wednesday (Wotan-Odin's day.) Thus, we can be reasonably certain that by Mercury, Odin was meant.<sup>96</sup> Of other gods, scholars are less certain. In Tacitus' *Germania* ch. 9, Hercules must represent Thor, but in the *Germania Interpretatio* of the weekdays, Thor is equated with the Roman ruler of the gods, Jove. This does not imply that Thor was ruler of the gods, only that like Jove, he wielded the thunderbolt. Similarly Mars may have represented Tyr, but west and south Germanic names of the weekdays cause etymological problems if derived directly from the name of the god,<sup>97</sup> thus we cannot be sure. After mentioning the worship of Mercury, Hercules and Mars as common Germanic gods, Tacitus names the first Germanic goddess. He says that some of tribes known collectively as the Suebi<sup>98</sup> also worship Isis. Her cult symbol is the ship. Because of this, he states his belief that her cult is of foreign extraction. Tacitus reports:

“As for gods, Mercury is the one they worship most, and on certain days they think it is right to propitiate him even with human victims. Hercules and Mars they appease with lawful animals. Part of the Suebi sacrifice also to Isis: I have not ascertained the source from which this foreign rite originates, but the fact remains that the image itself, fashioned in the form of a light ship, proves the cult is imported.”<sup>99</sup>

The name Isis is not what lead Tacitus to believe the cult was imported. The equally foreign Mercury, Hercules, and Mars posed no such problem. What looked foreign to Tacitus was the figure of the ship, which may have reminded him of the Roman *navigium Isidis*, a festival celebrated on the fifth of March, when the Greeks and Romans held a solemn procession presenting a ship to Isis to mark the reopening of rivers to navigation in spring.<sup>100</sup> Despite his confidence that this cult was of foreign extraction modern scholars with knowledge of the Isis cult and its historical dissemination through the ancient world, disagree. J. B. Rives writes:

“Since its spread was clearly due to Roman influence, it is highly unlikely that a Germanic tribe outside the empire would have adopted it. Consequently, most scholars agree that Tacitus (or more likely his source) identified a native goddess as Isis because of similar rituals involving ships. We should note that this is more of a case of mistaken identity than of *interpretatio Romana*, since

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<sup>95</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 174.

<sup>96</sup> *Early Germanic Literature and Culture*, Volume 1, Edited by Brian Murdoch and Malcolm Read, p. 82.

<sup>97</sup> Murdoch and Read, *ibid*, p.82.

<sup>98</sup> *Germania*, ch. 8: “We must come now to speak of the Suebi, who do not, like the Chatti or Tencteri, constitute a single nation. They actually occupy more than half of Germany, and are divided into a number of distinct tribes under distinct names, though all generally are called Suebi.” H. Mattingly tr.

<sup>99</sup> J. B. Rives, tr.

<sup>100</sup> Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, p. 258, Stalleybrass tr., citing Apuleius and Lactantius, two writers later than Tacitus, reporting on a custom that reached back to a much older date.

Tacitus seems to have thought that it was the actual Graeco-Egyptian goddess Isis whose cult the Suebi had adopted.”<sup>101</sup>

More than a century earlier, Jacob Grimm reflected that “it must have been a similar cult, not the same, and perhaps long established among the Germans.”<sup>102</sup> On several points, the cult of Isis is similar to that of Freyja— enough for a foreign observer to make a viable comparison. Even modern scholar Ursula Dronke remarks that in Snorri’s account of her marriage Freyja goes around “Isis-like, seeking her departed husband.”<sup>103</sup> In Egyptian mythology, Isis is best known for her devotion to her husband, Osiris. She wanders the world weeping in search of him. In this, Isis most resembles Freyja who wanders weeping through many lands in search of Óðr. Tacitus informs us that the emblem of her cult is a light warship, a symbol closely connected with Freyja’s brother Freyr. In Egyptian mythology, Isis is a goddess of fertility and motherhood. She is said to have taught the people to grow wheat, barley and flax, and to have presided over bread, beer, and green fields.<sup>104</sup> Although of foreign origin, she has much in common with the Vanic deities of the north. She was the patron of crafts, instructing women in the art of spinning and weaving.<sup>105</sup> She was the daughter of the god Geb (Earth) and the goddess Nut (Sky). As the sister and wife of Osiris, judge of the dead, she became the mother of Horus, god of day, and as Freyja first taught the Aesir *seiðr*, ancient stories describe Isis as having great magical skill. After Osiris, the first god-king of Egypt, was murdered by his brother Seth, who hacked Osiris’ body into pieces and scattered them across Egypt, Isis collected the pieces (all except the phallus which she could not find) and magically revived Osiris. She also magically conceived a son by him named Horus. A council of gods eventually decided that Horus was the rightful ruler, and demoted Seth. A new paradigm emerged in which Osiris ruled the underworld and Horus ruled Egypt. The Pharaohs were considered reincarnations of Horus, just as Scandinavian kings were said to be descendents of Freyr. The Isis cult spread from Alexandria throughout the Hellenistic world after the 4th century BC. The Greek historian Herodotus identified Isis with Demeter, the Greek goddess of earth, agriculture, and fertility. The cult of Isis was later introduced into Rome (86 BC) and became one of the most popular branches of Roman religion. Christians later renounced the cult for its open sexuality. Thus, whatever Tacitus learned of the cult of Freyja, would have closely matched his knowledge of the cult of Isis on the superficial as well as the deep level.

Another figure we must consider in this light is the obscure goddess Nehalennia named on 160 votive altars from the second and third centuries. Twenty-eight of these are found on the Rhine island of Walchern in the Netherlands. A similar number were discovered in 1971-72 at Colijnsplaat on the island of Noord-Beveland. Two more were found in the Cologne-Deutz area. She is most often depicted resting against the prow of a ship or an oar, carrying a basket of fruit, and accompanied by a dog. Her connection with the ship is further supported by inscriptions, some of which name merchants and thus may refer to a goddess of commerce.<sup>106</sup> We know nothing more of her. The etymology of

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<sup>101</sup> J. B. Rives, tr.

<sup>102</sup> Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, p. 258.

<sup>103</sup> *Poetic Edda*, Vol. II, p. 45.

<sup>104</sup> Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 53, citing Witt, 1971, p. 16-17.

<sup>105</sup> Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, p. 98, citing Witt, 1971, p. 41.

<sup>106</sup> Rudulf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, s.v. Nehalennia.

Nehalennia's name is uncertain. Some scholars have sought to derive her name from Latin *necare*, to kill, as well as the Anglo-Saxon or Old High German *helan*, to hide, thus identifying her as a death-goddess, like Freyja who chooses half of the slain. Her companion, the dog, widely interpreted as a symbol of death, supports this view. Some have associated Nehalennia with Nerthus, in whom many scholars recognize a Vanir deity. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that Nehalennia is an earlier designation of the goddess Freyja, a prominent fertility goddess who is associated with the sea through her father Njörd and her epithet Mardöll (Sea-shimmer), as well as the afterlife.

Baldur, Folla and Frija of the *Second Merseburg Charm*, as well as the gods Wotan and Donar named in the *Saxon Baptismal vow*, 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.<sup>107</sup> Despite the difficulty inherent in clearly identifying the cult of Freyr and Freyja prior to the Eddic sources, we find ample evidence for its existence. Regardless of its exact origin, the cult of Vanir cult was a powerful one, well-established at the time of the Christian conversion.

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<sup>107</sup> Murdoch and Read, *ibid*, p. 83.