

Frigg and Freyja: One Great Goddess or Two?

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In the mythological research of the last decades, greater attention has been paid to feminine deities than hitherto – which is natural in a society preoccupied with feminism and equality for women. This development in this particular field may be said to be partly due to the pioneering work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who through her research and theories on worship of a Mother Goddess from the early Stone Age, opened up new possibilities in the field and aroused interest and enthusiasm for the study of female deities, their images, roles and value. At the same time this new research and study has nonetheless tended to make rather little of the characteristics of individual goddesses, depicting them mostly as aspects of a single Great Mother Goddess that supposedly existed in prehistoric times.

This same approach has also been visible in the study of the Old Nordic goddesses, Frigg and Freyja, as well as those other goddesses whose names we know. The two chief figures are often treated as one and the same entity, and most of the other named goddesses have been regarded as aspects of this same being.¹ Two examples will show this: In her otherwise fine overview of Freyja as the Great Goddess of the North Britt-Mari Näsström defines the aforesaid great goddess as:

autonomous, ... [she] decides fate, ... [she is] associated with earth, but can appear as a sky-goddess, ... [she is] connected with the moon, only rarely with the sun, [and] her ambiguous character comprises both good and evil, sometimes divided into two goddesses who are apprehended as mother-daughter or as two sisters (Näsström, 1995, 73).

In her book *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, Hilda Ellis Davidson works in the same vein, once again treating the goddess-image as one Great Goddess, something which is apparent both in the chapter-names of her book and in her overall treatment of the subject. The Goddess is:

Mistress of the Animals, ... of the Grain, ... of Distaff and Loom, ... of the Household, ... of Life and Death (Ellis Davidson, 1998, v).

In both cases the criteria are made so wide that almost anything can be made to fit into them. It seems that this one goddess rules all spheres in the lives of man.

The idea and hypothesis of one Great Goddess is understandable for its times as a means of unifying international womanhood, but it must also be seen as being somewhat simple and overgeneralised. Thus my view has three main arguments: to begin with, although society changed less quickly in former times than it does nowadays, it seems to me an oversimplification to assume the existence of a single, almost world-wide goddess who only changed marginally over the millennia. Secondly, at all times societies around the world (and not least in the Nordic countries) have varied vastly due to different environments and resources, and it can be assumed that the gods people created for themselves are likely to have been just as different. Thirdly, even though gods from different places and societies might share similar

¹ In this context, see for example works by Steinsland, Clunies Ross, Kress, Jochens, Jesch, Hedeager, Mundal, Ellis Davidson, Näsström.

attributes and aspects, this does not have to be due to monogeneses, but can be attributed to common human traits and aspirations just as much as to the supposed shared roots of the gods.

Admittedly at first sight there seem to be quite a few things that might point to the idea that Frigg and Freyja are at root one and the same goddess: There seem to be obvious similarities in their names and a number of features in their descriptions and attributes overlap: for example, both seem to be closely connected to Óðinn, both are said to own a bird-costume, and both are connected with elements of mourning. However, were they actually ever one and the same goddess?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to review both relevant archaeological finds and textual sources and analyse those.

When looking through the relevant archaeological finds concerning the existence of goddesses and goddess-worship in Scandinavia, there are two things especially that catch the attention: One is that feminine deities seem to have been worshipped over a very long period of time – since the earliest references to such divinities seem to reach all the way back to the Stone- and Bronze-Age rock carvings in Norway and Sweden. The other is that there are certain recurrent strands and characteristics in these finds that seem to point to little or no change in concept over almost as long a period of time. Academics are in agreement that: most, if not all, of these finds have religious value in one way or another, either yielding images of goddesses or evidence of rituals connected with goddess-worship (see references in list below).

The main types of archaeological finds that are relevant here are artefacts of the following kind:

- Rock carvings Stone Age – Early Bronze Age
 - Female figures (?), winged and beaked figures, cup marks (see for example Malmer, 1989, 9; Hygen and Bengtsson, 2000, 91, 127-128).
- Rock carvings in the Kivik grave Bronze Age
 - Women/bird (?) figures (see for example Glob, 1971, 89; Almgren, 1926-27, 174).
- (Acrobat?) girls in string-skirt Bronze Age
 - Corpses (The Egtved girl), figurines (Fårdal, Grevensvænge) (see for example Glob, 1971, 42-45; Ericson and Löfman, 1985, 108; Ellis Davidson, 1998, 91-93; Arild Hauge, 2006).
- Bog Sacrifices Iron Age
 - Corpses (Tollund-man, Elling-woman), female tree-figures (Rebild, Foerlev) (see for example Glob, 1965, 23-24; Müller-Wille, 2002, 146-149).
- Gotland Picture Stones 5th -11th century AD
 - Women with horns, winged figures, birds (Lindqvist, 1941-41, 101-102).
- Guldgubbar* 6th-8th cent. AD
 - Man and woman – pair-motif (see for example Steinsland 1990, 73-87; McKinnell, 2005, 60).
- Amulets Viking Age
 - Female images, often with horns (Birka, Tuna, Klinta) (see for example Price, 2003, 285; Ingunn, 2005, 84).
- The Oseberg Grave Viking Age (835-850)

Artefacts of various kinds, tapestry (Ingstad, 1992, 248, 254)

Neck rings and necklacesBronze Age to Viking Age

To be seen on nearly every depiction of female deities during all this time, also a common feature in female graves, as well as in sacrificial hoards of precious artifacts, often found in or near water.

As the quantity of finds of this kind can not be overlooked it seems safe to assume the existence of quite a strong goddess-cult in one form or another in the religious life of the Nordic peoples throughout this time. The common features and characteristics of all these finds undeniably strengthen this idea; here, among other things, we are talking about recurrent bird imagery, acrobatic dancing, various similarities in clothing and attire – especially interesting is the distinctive hair-knot seen clearly on the Gotland stones as well as on the *guldgubbar*, amulets, women-images on the Oseberg tapestries (where the horses' tails are also knotted in this same way), and even hinted at as early as on some of the female rock carvings. The key features of these goddess-cults (on the basis of archaeology) can be summed up as follows:

Fertility-connection – many of the finds indicate that their nature is connected with the fertility of the earth and proliferation of animals and men .

A connection with death and the afterlife – much of the imagery and gravegoods that are relevant here indicates that there was worship of a goddess or goddesses of both life and death.

Sacrifice – a large part of the finds seem to be of sacrificial nature, either by ritually giving something to the deity or doing something in worship of the deity in the hope of getting something in return.

The limiting nature of such archaeological finds from a non-literate culture-era is clear from the fact that even if we may be sure of such a religious nature of the objects, indicating that there are most likely particular deities involved in each case, we have no way of knowing anything about whether these deities had special names and if so, what those names were. There are for example no runic inscriptions that mention Frigg or Freyja. In spite of this, and apart from the common strands mentioned above, there is more that points to a special direction: very many of these archaeological finds, especially the earlier ones, seem to have been connected with water, i.e. found in or near water, and more often than not connected to sacrifice and/or death. It seems thus quite likely that this goddess may have been of the kind of fertility divinity that later came to be defined as Vanir gods. However, it is not until place-names and later textual sources come into light that such particularities can be asserted.

Theophoric place-names can be said to be the earliest source of deities' names in Nordic regions, and when looking for the names of the two goddesses in question here, an interesting fact emerges: Only one place-name is to be found referring to Frigg, Friggeråker in Sweden (Sahlgren, 1932, 59), whereas place-names referring to Freyja are to be found in abundance all over Scandinavia (Sahlgren, 1932, 58; de Vries, 1957, 301). In contrast, no place-names referring to Freyja are found on the European continent. It might also be noted that Jöran Sahlgren has shown that place-names referring to the so-called Vanir gods are among the oldest place-names in the Nordic lands, and they are more numerous than theophoric Æsir place-names

(Sahlgren, 1932, 60). Jan de Vries also underlines that place-names referring to the Vanir goddess Freyja show definitely that she is an old and powerful deity in these regions (de Vries, 1957, 310). The implications of this are that the archaeological finds are related to different divinities.

It is only with the textual sources that a picture starts to emerge of feminine deities with names, stories and 'concrete' references. The oldest extant textual source of a named feminine deity in the North is of course Tacitus's reference to the Germanic goddess Nerthus who seems to have had her sanctuary on what is now a Danish island (Tacitus, 1939, ch. 40). It is noteworthy that this name refers not only to a goddess, but etymologically to a Vanir goddess; later, for some odd, unexplained reason, this deity seems to have changed sex and become the Vanir god Njörðr, father of Freyja. Half a millennium later we come across our first reference to Frigg in Paulus Diaconus's *History of the Langobards* (Paulus Diaconus, 2006, ch. VIII), a Germanic people living in the area that now is North Italy. The next reference to her is the Old High German *Second Merseburg Charm* (Lindquist, 1923, 43) from at least as early as the tenth century. This comes from a much more northern region, although still not as far north as Scandinavia. It is not until the recording of the Old Norse eddic poetry and Snorri Sturluson's writings that Frigg is shown to be a steadfast member of the Nordic pantheon.

It is worth looking at the name-forms, Frigg and Freyja, as a starting point to see whether these two goddesses may be of the same roots or not. The forms of Frigg's name, of which the earliest sources are mainly to be found on the European continent (Paulus Diaconus, 1878, ch. VIII; Lindquist, 1923, 43) i.e. OHG *Frija*, OS *Fri*, OE *Frige*, are all derived from Sanskrit *priya* 'beloved one, wife' (de Vries, 1957, 143) and become the Nordic name Frigg:

'Intervocalic *j w* after short vowels show in many words strengthened articulation... In West Germanic, the first part of the lengthened semi-vowel forms a diphthong with the preceding short vowel, but in Gothic and Norse it is harrowed to a stop.' (Prokosch, 1939, 21-33; see also Noreen, 1970, 165-166 and Wessén, 1961, 36).

These name-forms follow Indo-Germanic linguistic development and the migrations to and around Europe which go back to the second millennium BC. However, the image of Frigg that emerges from the Latin textual sources (Paulus Diaconus, 1878, ch. VIII; Saxo Grammaticus, 2002, 26) is quite unlike the prim Nordic goddess of eddic poetry and Snorri's writing. The Germanic wife of Wodan/Godan (= Odin/Óðinn) is a lustful war-happy goddess, even sorceress. A point not to be forgotten in this context is the *Interpretatio Germanica* where *Dies Veneris* becomes *Frigedæg*. A conclusion to draw from this is that in her original Indo-Germanic form Frigg was probably a lively fertility deity, something like the Eddic image of Freyja.

Freyja's name on the other hand means 'lady, queen' (de Vries, 1957, 142). When tracing Freyja's name further back we find OHG *frouwa* and OS *frua* meaning 'lady', the development most likely being explained by *uo*-ablaut from the Indo-Germanic root *prō* and words derived from it like OI *pravana*, OSl *pravŭ* 'leaning forward', OI *pūrva*, *pūrvya* and OSl *prŭvŭ*, all meaning 'first, foremost'. It seems thus that the name Freyja is originally a title, given to an ancient Nordic Vanir goddess, who may in particular areas originally have been of the same or a similar type as the

Freyja of the textual sources, or even have borne the various other personal names Freyja also is said to have been called, e.g. Hörn, Gefn, Sýr – even Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2005, 239, 269; McKinnell, 2005, 85-91). The Freyja title may also have taken hold through the power and influence of the Ynglingar kings in Uppsala, as her brother Freyr was there according to Adam of Bremen, as one of the three main gods in the temple (Adam of Bremen, 1917, ch. 26-27). It is also possible that a taboo against speaking the goddess' real name may have had something to do with such development.

When searching the textual sources for evidence of similarities and dissimilarities between Frigg and Freyja in order to draw information about their possible roots other interesting things appear. As noted earlier, at first sight they seem to have quite a few things in common, both are for example said to own a bird-costume (Snorri Sturluson, 1998, 2, 24, 30; *Frymskviða* sts. 3, 5, 9). Looking closer there is nothing to be found about Frigg owning a bird-costume except for Snorri's statement, neither a clear nor indicated connection. With Freyja this is radically different. We have quite a convincing evidence for Freyja having been a queen of the valkyries if not their superior, just as she seems to rule the *dísir* (Ellis Davidson, 1998, 178; Ström, 1954, ch. 3 & 4; Näsström, 1995, 47). The image of valkyries shows them riding air and water and choosing those who shall fall in battle; in some cases they also own bird-costumes (*Völundarkviða* 1-3). The oldest textual reference that seems to indicate valkyries is to be found in the OE poem *The Battle of Brunanburgh* from the early 10th century, where ravens are in this role. It is thinkable that the original Nordic idea of valkyries was of some kind of female spirits in birdshape connected to battle and death; these then later developed into an image of women who could change into birds in certain circumstances. In this context we may remember the various winged and/or beaked figures on the Swedish rock carvings, in the Kivik grave as well as on the Gotland stones (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2005, 196-197). In *Grimnismál* 14 it also says that Freyja receives half of the fallen and lives in Fólkvangur which means battlefield. This is all in harmony with the idea of her serving as queen of the valkyries and it is quite logical. As noted, the Vanir cult is thought to be very old in the Nordic countries – far older than the Æsir cult. Furthermore, belief in obscure female powers with magical abilities, like *dísir*, norms and valkyries, seems to be much older than the belief in deities with known names (Ólafur Briem, 1963, 69-73; Jochens, 1996, 33-48, 77). Nevertheless, there are clear connections with Freyja here.

Another thing which at first seems to indicate similarities between Frigg and Freyja is that they are both connected with Óðinn. In all sources Frigg is said to be Óðinn's wife while Freyja's husband is Óðr in Snorri's writings and apparently also in *Völuspá* st. 25. In *Sörla þáttir*, Freyja is said to be Óðinn's lover. Furthermore both Óðinn and Óðr are said to have gone away from home (Snorri Sturluson, 1988, 29; Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 12, Saxo Grammaticus, 2002, 26) and the similarities between their names are obvious. As a result they are by many thought to be one and the same person (Ellis Davidson, 1990, 106, 154; Ström, 1961, 132, 182). Besides this, however, the other similarities between Frigg and Freyja in connection with Óðinn are trivial. Frigg's image is essentially that of the wife of Óðinn, she is the chief *ásynja*, but independently of Óðinn she has little power. In no way is she directly connected with death, whereas Freyja has very strong relations to both fertility and death: she and

her life-giving force is the giants' main object of desire, her names, Gefn, Sýr and Hörn all refer to fertility and proliferation, and, as Snorri says, 'á hana er gott at heita til ásta' (Snorri Sturluson, 1988, 25). Freyja also receives half of the fallen in battle alongside Óðinn, and she is probably also the queen of the valkyries and *disir*, as one of her names is *Vanadís*. Hörn is another of her names, connecting her to flax and spinning, which many believe is closely knit to fate, magic and *seiðr*. It is interesting in this context that according to Snorri it is Freyja who is said to have taught the art of *seiðr* to the Æsir (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 13). Thomas DuBois' theory that *seiðr* originated with the Saami people in the far North and spread from there to more Southern, Scandinavian regions (DuBois, 1999, 128-129, 136-137) where the Vanir gods were influential, may be reflected in the idea that Freyja taught *seiðr* to gods like Óðinn who had come from the south.

One more thing is worthy of notice. Both Frigg and Freyja are said to be overcome with sorrow at some point. While Frigg's sorrow is the typical grief of a mother over a lost son, Freyja's sorrow is much more complicated. It has a strongly erotic aura and is also closely related to gold as Freyja is said to weep tears of gold. This connection with gold is one of her main personal characteristics: she carries the great Brisingamen and her daughters are named Hnoss and Gersemi. In her image gold and eroticism blend (see *Sörla þáttur*, 1944, 304).

At a closer look the supposed similarities between Frigg and Freyja hold little water. The impression is that we have here two different goddesses that blend together rather than one figure. In his descriptions Snorri Sturluson nonetheless seems to consciously make Frigg the more prominent. However, Freyja is always there with her foot in the door. It is hard not to think of her as having been a powerful, independent and free deity who enjoyed such a strong cult and worship, that historians and poets could not bypass her as they may have wanted to do. In *Ynglinga saga* 10 it says:

Freyia helt þá uppi blótum, því at hon ein lifði þá eptir goðanna. Ok varð hon þá in frægsta ... (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 24-25).

Thus it seems that when Christianity was taking hold, people were reluctant to give up their worship of this ancient goddess who possibly stood nearer to their lives and world-view than the new Christian religion.

In general the images of Frigg and Freyja are quite different. What carries the greatest weight in this is the fact that all sources are in agreement that they are of separate kin: Frigg is of the Æsir, Freyja of the Vanir. The Æsir cult is, as mentioned above, generally thought to be younger in Scandinavian lands than that of the Vanir; place-names confirm this and their movement from Indo-Germanic origin westwards through South-Eastern Europe and then northwards, possibly during the first millennium AD if not earlier, can be followed through textual sources (Paulus Diaconus, *Second Merseburg Charm*, Saxo Grammaticus) and corresponding linguistic development. The Æsir stand nearer to being sky-gods, gods of war, knowledge and the upper social classes; they are connected to culture and male social order, whereas the Vanir are closer to the earth and its products, water and untamed nature and fertility (for example Ellis Davidson, 1988, 165). According to Snorri the ancient practice of sibling-marriages was customary among the Vanir but unheard of among the Æsir (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 13). The image that is given of Frigg is that as wife of Óðinn and mother of Baldr she is said to be the chief goddess, her realm of

power is reliant on Óðinn and her activity and independence are not of much consequence; thus she is of course better suited to the Christian ideology that prevailed in Snorri's time. Freyja on the other hand seems independent and free and her realm of power is in definite areas of life; she is goddess of fertility, love, magic and *seiðr*, even of death.

It also seems quite clear that the Nordic Vanir goddess received sacrifices, both in artifacts and blood, and both archaeological and textual sources support this (see list of archaeological finds above, as well as for example *Hyndluljóð* st. 10, Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 13, 24), but no such information is to be found where Frigg is concerned, possibly with the exception of some bog finds. This may not be surprising as she is a sky-deity, goddess of marriage and nowhere connected to death or battles after she becomes a Nordic goddess. On the other hand the ancient Nordic Vanir goddess seems to have retained her independent powers and worship in spite of the intrusion of the Æsir gods. Her image and even names also seem to have varied in the North, depending on places, life-styles and social circumstances. It is even possible that there were many independent images of this goddess, if not individual goddesses, isolated in small communities, but with local names, attributes and characteristics which have now disappeared in the mists of time.

My conclusion is that even though Frigg and Freyja both seem to have been fertility goddesses in different areas, their root images seem in all likelihood to have originated at different times and in different parts of the world, and each seems originally to have had quite distinct features. This becomes evident from the above mentioned archaeological and textual evidence as well as from etymological scrutiny of their names along with the theophoric place-names related to them.

When belief in the Indo-European-rooted Óðinn moved northwards to the Nordic countries along with belief in Frigg, it appears to have encountered another belief system in which the Vanir and Freyja had a central role. Later however, images of the two goddesses clearly started to blend, especially in textual sources written after Christianity had established its foothold (Snorri Sturluson, Saxo Grammaticus). It seems, however, that in spite of some effort the alien (and more masculine-dominated) Frigg never succeeded in pushing aside the more ancient Nordic Vanir goddess who by that time had acquired the name (or description) Freyja, at least in some influential places. Such a process might explain why the functions of the two goddesses have come to overlap as much as they do in the extant sources.

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