

**Lady of the Elves:
The Great Germanic Goddess
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Abstract:

The prominent goddess of Europe was known in Germany as Berchta and Holda, who appear as goddesses of the bright and the gloomy. These pairings might be represented as Berchta and Holda, Frigg and Hel, and Freyia and Hyndla. The bright goddess arose as a goddess of the sun and sky and the gloomy one appeared as representative of the earth and underworld, but with Berchta and Holda they encompass both aspects and were largely interchangeable. She received the souls of the dead who rode along the path of the Milky Way in a wagon to the underworld. As 'lady of the elves' or 'queen of the fairies' the *huldren*, elves, and dwarfs, thought to be spirits of the dead, would appear with her on earth from time to time. The goddess held her position until the appearance of the sky god, which subsequently caused her to take on the role of an earth and fertility goddess. The necklace of Freyia may have initially arisen from either the view that vegetation was the clothing or girdle of the earth or as the rainbow.

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Introduction

The most prominent goddesses in Germany were Holda (propitious) and Berchta (bright, glorious). Holda also went by the name Holle, Hulla, Hulle, Huldra, Huldre, Helle¹ and Berchta by Berchte, Perchthe, Perchtha, Berhta, Bertha, Herke, Freke, Precht, Perchtel, Berchtolt, but they were sometimes combined into one goddess Hildaberta or Bildaberta (Grimm 2004: 277).

Likewise, the two share the same characteristics:

They drive about in *waggon*s, like mother Earth, and promote agriculture and navigation among men; a *plough*, from which there fall chips of gold, is their sacred implement. This too is like the gods, that they appear *suddenly*, and Berhta especially hands her gifts *in at the window*. Both have spinning and weaving at heart, they insist on diligence and keeping of festivals holy, on the transgressor grim penalties are executed. The souls of *infant children* are found in their host, as they likewise rule over *elves* and *dwarfs*, but *night-hags* and *enchantresses* also follow in their train. (Grimm 2004: 282)

Both Holda and Berchta were known to travel around on wagons and often carried with them a plow (Grimm 2004: 282). The earth was called ‘mother of men’ (Grimm 2004: 1239), brought the fruits of agriculture, and was thought also to be take back the dead. Motherly earth hides the dead in her bosom, and the world of souls is an underground world. (Grimm 2004: 952) In addition Grimm says newborns were said to come from dame Holle’s pond (2004: 268). Unchristened children (*heimchen*) went to Holda, because they were considered to be still under heathen powers, and were seen weeping as they accompanied her on her travels (Grimm 2004: 275). Those children who fell into a well would find their way to her house through her green meadows (Grimm 2004: 822).

¹ Holle may be the origin of our word ‘holy’ (compare to Helgi meaning ‘holy one’).

Holda was thought to haunt around lakes and fountains, and that she could be glimpsed at the noon hour, radiantly as a fair white lady bathing in the water and then quickly vanishing (Grimm 2004: 268). The next step is, that Hulda, instead of her divine shape, assumes the appearance of an *ugly old woman*, long-nosed, big-toothed, with bristling and thick-matted hair. (Grimm 2004: 269) She was also sometimes had a larger right foot that came from her continual spinning (Grimm 2004: 280).

Every seventh year, *when may-lilies are in bloom*, a *white maiden* appears; her black hair is plaited in long tails, she wears a *golden girdle* round her *white gown*, a *bundle of keys* at her side or in one hand, and a bunch of *may-lilies* in the other. (Grimm 2004: 963)

Huldra is also given as the mother of the goddesses Thorgerd and Irpa and beloved of Odin (Grimm 2004: 271). The Norse Hulle was goddess of cattle-grazing and milking (Grimm 2004: 272), where agriculture may have been more scarce.

Of still more weight perhaps are some Norwegian and Danish folk-tales about a wood or mountain wife *Hulla, Huldra, Huldre*, whom they set forth, not as young and lovely, then again as old and gloomy. In a blue garment and white veil she visits the pasture-grounds of herdsman, and mingles in the dances of men; but her shape is disfigured by a tail, which she takes great pains to conceal. Some accounts make her beautiful in front and ugly behind. She loves music and song, her lay has a doleful melody and is called *huldreslaat*. In the forests you see *Huldra* as an old woman clothed in gray, marching at the head of her flock, milkpail in hand. She is said to carry off people's unchristened infants from them. Often she appears, not alone, but as mistress or queen of the mountain-sprites, who are called *huldrefolk*. (Grimm 2004: 271-272)

In Germany, they were known as *holden*, after Holda, and elves too were thought to congregate near springs and lakes (Grimm 2004: 1422). They were also known to dance and feast under stones raised upon pillars on Christmas night (McCulloch 1964: 287). The Elf Queen appears in the Swedish fairy tale “The Elves’ Dance”:

Exhausted at last by constant walking, he sat down at the foot of an oak to rest himself. Presently strains of lovely music reached his ears, and he saw, quite near, a multitude of little people engaged in a lively ring dance upon the sward. So light were their footsteps that the tops of the grass blades were scarcely moved.

In the middle of the ring stood the Elf Queen herself, taller and more beautiful than the others, with a golden crown upon her head and her clothes sparkling in the moonlight with gold and precious stones. (Booss 1984: 298)

Berchta, known as the white lady (Grimm 2004: 273), too had the role of fairy queen, attended by many elves or dwarfs. In the Icelandic fairy tale “Hildur, the Queen of the Elves”, Hildur travels on a herdsman to Elf-land on the night of Christmas eve.²

Then mounting on his back, she made him rise from the ground as if on wings, and rode him through the air, till they arrived at a huge and awful precipice, which yawned, like a great well, down into the earth...So he managed, after a short struggle, to get the bridle off his head, and having done so, leapt into the precipice, down which he had seen Hildur disappear. After sinking for a long, long time, he caught a glimpse of Hildur beneath him, and at last they came to some beautiful green meadows...When they had gone some way along the meadows, a splendid palace rose before them, with the way to which Hildur seemed perfectly well acquainted. (Booss 1984: 621)

² There are other tales about men being ridden by witches, such as ‘The Colonel and the Witch’ (Ivanits 1992: 194-195).

This passage takes one down into the underworld, also arrived at by sinking down through a swamp to “a vast and charming green plain” (Booss 1984: 661). Elves were also known to sink into the ground, passing back into the elf-world (Booss 1984: 482).

In addition, she led the Wild Hunt at the time of the winter solstice accompanied by her wild hounds (Grimm 2004: 1368).³ Holda too was associated with the witches’ ride, referred to as ‘Holle-riding’ or ‘riding with Holle’ (Grimm 2004: 269). Bede mentions that Christmas Eve night was referred to as “Mother’s night” (Jones 1995: 124), which could be an adaptation of Berchta’s Eve (Grimm 2004: 275). She was associated with the ‘twelfths’ between Yule and New Year’s and was seen on New Year’s eve (Twelfth-day eve) riding her wagon and destroying unfinished spinning (Grimm 2004: 273). In this, according to Grimm, and the practice of setting out food and drink for her, Berchta and Holda resemble the Greek Hecate, goddess of the underworld (Grimm 2004: 1368-1369). On the last day of the year a dish of herring and oats was left out for Berchta (Grimm 2004: 273) which is similar to the meal left for Hecate (Grimm 2004: 1369). She was also associated with the ship and perhaps represented one of the deities who had a ceremonial ship carried about in her honor (Grimm 2004: 265, 1366).⁴

When there was fog on the mountain it was said that Dame Holle had lit a fire in the hill, and when it was snowing that she was making her bed and her feathers were falling down (Grimm 2004: 1367).

“Stay with me; if you will do all the work in the house properly, you shall be the better for it. Only you must take care to make my bed well, and to shake it thoroughly till the feathers fly—for then there is snow on the earth. I am Mother Holle.” (Grimm Brothers 1997: 134)

³ In Tyrol a frau Selga rides at the head of the nightly host (Grimm 2004: 1567).

⁴ Plows, which were also carried around in procession, might originally have been considered somewhat akin to the boat (Grimm 2004: 1366), no doubt due to their shape. Thus the goddess of the ship was also goddess of the plow, as it says that Berchta and Holda “promote agriculture and navigation” (Grimm 2004: 282).

Frau Holle was known as the goddess of the skies, like the Greek Hera. In Germany around Lucerne, thunder was said to be Perht reeling her flax, and the Milky Way was known as *Vroneldenstraet* (frauen Hilde street) (Grimm 2004: 285).⁵

So Holda and Berchta were not merely goddesses of the earth and underworld, but of the sky, the wind and weather. This means she may also be goddess of the Sun. In Germanic tradition, contrary to the Roman, the Moon was viewed as male and the Sun as female. In German they were *herr mond* and *frau sonne* (Grimm 2004: 704) and the Letts thought of the Sun and Moon as sister and brother (Grimm 2004: 1500). The goddess *Froijenborg* in a Swedish folk song is called the beautiful sun (Grimm 2004: 302) and Berchta means ‘bright’ and so is descriptive of the Sun⁶ with Heimdall (‘world’s illuminator’) as the Moon—the gods of the Germans mentioned by Caesar.

Understanding the Goddess

The notion of the mother goddess as being both divine maiden and ugly hag came from the dichotomies of the world: youth and age, summer and winter, birth and death, light and darkness, growth and decay. These were two aspects of the same thing, and the dual goddess have been sisters (as with Freyia and Hyndla) or depicted as having one attractive and one repulsive side, as Grimm says: Poets of the 13th century paint the World as a beautifully formed woman in front, whose back is covered with snakes and adders (Grimm 2004: 850). Just as the goddess Hel is

⁵ This would then be the same as the path or bridge to Hel upon which the dead tread.

⁶ In Ireland even to this day reeds in the shape of a sun-wheel (Bridget’s crosses) are taken around in honor of St. Bridget on her day (Eaton 2002: “Saints”).

described as being a woman above but dark beneath, known as both gloomy and fierce. This dichotomy might first have been a representation of the earth, that was beautiful above ground with its plants and verdure, but below the surface was all dark and gloomy.

In this Holda resembles Hel, who received the dead into the underworld (Grimm 2004: 840). In Danish belief Hel travelled on her wagon pulled by a white three-legged horse, a portent of plague and pestilence (Grimm 2004: 314, Guerber 1992: 184) or out to collect the dead with large rake or broom (Guerber 1992: 360). In the Middle Ages she was thought to have large gaping jaws with which to consume (Grimm 2004: 314). Hel's name not only resembles that of Holle, but *holle* was another name for Hel (Grimm 2004: 1539).

Orion's relation to Artemis is not like that of Wuotan to Holda, for these two are never seen together in the host; but Holda by herself bears a strong resemblance to *Artemis* or *Diana*, still more to the nightly huntress *Hecate*, at whose approach *dogs whimper* (as with *frau Gaude*), who, like Hel, is scented by dogs, and for whom a paltry pittance was placed (as for *Berhta* and the wild woman). (Grimm 2004: 949)

Goddesses of spinning and weaving appear often throughout Germanic myth and legend, and often appear in groups of three (Grimm 2004: 1402). This seems to associate them with the Norns, but also the Valkyries, who were also sometimes seen as weavers and appeared in groups of three, seven or nine (Davidson 1998: 185). "The Valkyries would weave together and then would each tear off a piece for themselves and ride away. It was said that upon this cloth were the fates of the men to be slain in battle." (Davidson 1998: 118) In *Njal's Saga* it says:

On the morning of Good Friday, in Caithness, this happened: a man named Dorrud walked outside and saw twelve people riding together to a woman's room, and then they disappeared inside. He went up to the room and looked in through a window that was there and saw that there were women inside and that they had set

up a loom. Men's heads were used for weights, men's intestines for the weft and warp, a sword for the sword beater, and an arrow for the pin beater. (Cook 2001: 303)

This indicates that the Valkyries and the Norns might first have been equated with three goddesses of fate, that may have corresponded to birth, life and death. They may first have viewed these as aspects of the same goddess, but then later they became split into different aspects. The notion of the Valkyries taking heroes up to Valhall is not much different from the notion of the Wild Hunt, where spirits would ride to the underworld with the goddess of death.

As these goddesses were also the 'lady of the elves' or 'queen of the fairies', this role again seems to represent a guardian of departed souls. According to Grimm, just as men only came up as high as a giant's knee, dwarfs only came up as high as a man's knee, but some were the only the size of a thumb. Indian stories speak of the soul as leaving the body as a man as big as a thumb. (Grimm 2004: 1412) The Indian Yama is said to draw the soul out of the dying man in the shape of a tiny mannikin, at which time the man turns pale and sinks into the ground; but when the mannikin returns to him he rises back, thinking he had but been asleep for that time. Or it is said that the soul slips out of the mouth as a little child. (Grimm 2004: 1548) The Roman *lares* were thought to be departed ancestors and in Germany souls were thought to become *kobolds* (homesprites) (Grimm 2004: 913). According to Grimm, the names of the dwarfs Dainn and Nainn mean death⁷, implying they are embodied souls (Grimm 2004: 1414), and a burial mound at Geirstad was known as *Geirstadar-álf* (MacCulloch 1964: 226). Both dwarfs and giants are mentioned to serve the wild women, who conduct people to their dwelling along a narrow path (Grimm 2004: 894), which recalls the narrow bridge to the underworld, as wide only as a thread.

⁷ The name of the Swedish Tomten might be compared to German word *toten* (dead).

The Nordic Goddesses

The primary goddesses of the north are Frigg and Freyia, both of whom arose from the same goddess as Berchta.⁸ Perhaps they derive from Freke and are equivalent to Frick, who was also a goddess of wind. They are also related to the German Frea, the Indian Priye or Prithvi (Grimm 2004: 303).⁹

Frigg and Freyia themselves seem to have a more recent common origin, implying they were the same goddess at some point in Germanic history. The name of each means ‘woman’, which makes them both claimants to the distinction of supreme female deity. Each is associated with their abilities as a seeress, and each possesses a magic falcon garment that allows them to transform themselves into the form of a bird for their flight into the spirit world.¹⁰ In both incarnations, this deity was called upon for protection at times of marriage and, according to the poem *Oddrúnargrátr*, of childbirth (Davidson 1998: 119).

Freyia’s journeying over the earth weeping for Od was meant to explain the morning dew, which in Frigg’s case was applied to the entire earth upon the death of her son Baldr. In the myth of Baldr’s death the goddess of the underworld is Hel, just as in ‘Hundluljod’ Hyndla is the underworld sister of Freyja, implying that they might represent two aspect of the goddess, the bright and the gloomy.¹¹ The earth itself was Fiorgyn, equivalent to Iord, while the archaic Frigg

⁸ One name for Freyia is Moerthöll (Mardoll), that may mean ‘shining over the sea’ (MacCulloch 1964: 126).

⁹ The Sanskrit word for wife is ‘priya’ (beloved). The name of Wotan’s wife is Frea, which might too have originally meant simply ‘wife’. The word ‘bride’ might have come from Bridget (Brid), a goddess closely related to Frea.

¹⁰ Frigg is known as “queen of the falcon form” (Sturluson 1987: 86).

¹¹ Two hills near Leira in Sjaellend are named Hyldehög and Frijszhög (MacCulloch 1964: 158).

(Berchta) was the Sun, before the arrival of the sky god (Tyr or Odin) made her an earth goddess.¹²

Because Frigg's spinning was done on Thursday, women were not permitted to spin at that time. In Latvia it was for the goddess Laima that spinning, weaving, agriculture and childbirth were forbidden on Thursday evenings. (Davidson 1998: 104) The reason for it being Thursday rather than Friday is because the night proceeded the day, so that Friday night came before Friday day, and it was Friday that was sacred to the goddess Frigg.

Freyia's Necklace

Freyia's chief symbol is her necklace *Brisingamen* (bright necklace).¹³ Taking the story from 'Sorla-thattr' Guerber writes:

One day, while she was in Svartalfaheim, the underground kingdom, Freya saw four dwarfs fashioning the most wonderful necklace she had ever seen. Almost beside herself with longing to possess this treasure, which was called Brisingamen. Freya implored the dwarfs to give it to her; but they obstinately refused to do so unless she would promise to grant them her favor. Having secured the necklace at this price, Freya hastened to put it on, and its beauty so enhanced her charms that she wore it night and day, and only occasionally could be persuaded to lend it to the other divinities. (Guerber 1992: 134-135)

¹² Clearly it was not merely the infiltration of male sky gods that displaced the female gods. This would not explain the god and goddess pairings that recur. Could it be that the single goddess acquired a male companion who is almost always both brother and consort? Thus there are Berchta and Berchtolt, Frigg and Friggo, Freyia and Freyr, Juno and Jove.

¹³ Bonfires in Norway are called *brisingr* (Grimm 2004: 124).

A similar necklace is the property of Gefion, that she also received as a gift for her favors, in her case from an enchanted youth. As it says in ‘Lokasenna’:

*‘Be silent, Gefion, I’m going to mention this,
how your heart was seduced;
the white boy gave you a jewel
and you laid your thigh over him.’*

(Larrington 1999: 88)

Frigg too is shown to possess the same covetous nature of her Vanir counterpart. *Gesta Danorum* speaks of a golden statue brought to Odin in his image:

His wife, Frigg, desiring to walk abroad more bedizened, brought in smiths to strip the statue of its gold. Odin had them hanged and then, setting the image on a plinth, by a marvelous feat of workmanship made it respond with a voice to human touch. Subordinating her husband’s divine honors to the splendor of her own apparel, Frigg submitted herself to the lust of one of her servants; by his cunning the effigy was demolished and the gold which had been devoted to public idolatry went to serve her personal pleasure. This woman, unworthy of a deified consort, felt no scruples about pursuing unchastity, provided she could more speedily enjoy what she coveted. (Grammaticus 1979: vol. I, 26)

Amber pendants existed in the north from prehistoric times (Maringer 2002: 128) and might even have descended into the ‘stone chain’ said in *Skaldskaparmal* to have been a necklace worn by women in antiquity (Sturluson 1987: 94). Thus it was viewed as a feminine symbol, perhaps

viewed as a symbol that gained the favor of a woman, just as a man worked to gain the favor of the earth in agriculture.¹⁴ Therefore the necklace would also be a symbol of fertility.

Out of mythology comes the references from the *Iliad*, where the necklace or girdle of Aphrodite could drive men to passion. Aphrodite passed her girdle on to Hera for her use:

With that she loosed from her breasts the breastband,
pierced and alluring, with every kind of enchantment
woven through it...There is the heat of Love,
the pulsing rush of Longing, the lover's whisper,
irresistible—magic to make the sanest man go mad.
And thrusting it into Hera's outstretched hands
she breathed her name in a throbbing, rising voice:
“Here now, take this band, put it between your breasts—
ravishing openwork, and the world lies in its weaving!
You won't return, I know, your mission unfulfilled,
whatever your eager heart desires to do.”
(Homer 1990: 376)

This too is recorded in Flaccus's *Argonautica*:

Venus is not at all fooled, but she, too, has tried to destroy
the Colcian land and Apollo's detestable race and can see
exactly what Juno is trying to do. At once, she agrees
and gives the other without any further pleading that awesome
aphrodisiac charm, the girdle that radiates lust

¹⁴ Sometimes the goddess is referred to by her ornamentation, such as Menglod (necklace-glad). There is also the Himalayan goddess of nature Mushiringmen, a name that might be related to Brisingamen.

at a fever-heat to incinerate all caution and faith and shred
of honor in males, and prompts, at whatever peril, to sin.
(Flaccus 1999: 122)

This is the way it was with Medea in those first moments
that led her on to her fits of madness. She fingers the necklace
that flashes around her helpless neck, and its lustrous gold
seems to melt the strength of her limbs. She gives it back
to the goddess, not displeased by the gemstones or crafted metal
but afraid of the feelings of passionate wildness that rouse in her shreds
of maidenly shame while they rouge her cheeks with delicate blushes.
(Flaccus 1999: 128)

The piece of turf raised underwhich people would take oaths was called *iardarmen* (Iord's necklace) (Grimm 2004: 643), equating vegetation to women's finery.

There is one other important reference in *Beowulf* that speaks of Hama taking the necklace Brosingamene:

There was no hoard like it since Hama snatched
the Brosings' neck-chain and bore it away
with its gems and settings to his shining fort,
away from Eormenric's wiles and hatred,
and thereby ensured his eternal reward.
(Heaney 2000: 85)

As Hama seems to be a form of the name Heimdall then the necklace would appear to be the rainbow.¹⁵ This does not match any details found in the story of the theft of Freyia's necklace, but in Lithuania the rainbow was known as Lauma's girdle¹⁶ (Grimm 2004: 733). It is possible that the original myth of the theft from the goddess of the Sun was a battle between water (rain)¹⁷ and fire (lightning) during a thunderstorm. Afterwards, when the Sun shone, the necklace returned to her as the rainbow. This appears to be the most likely origin of the story.

Heimdall immediately started out in pursuit of the midnight thief, and quickly overtaking him, he drew his sword from its scabbard, with intent to cut off his head, when the god transformed himself into a flickering blue flame. Quick as thought, Heimdall changed himself into a cloud and sent down a deluge of rain to quench the fire; but Loki as promptly altered his form to that of a huge polar bear, and opened wide his jaws to swallow the water. Heimdall, nothing daunted, then likewise assumed the form of a bear, and attacked fiercely; but the combat threatening to end disastrously for Loki, the latter changed himself into a seal, and, Heimdall imitating him, a last struggle took place, which ended in Loki being forced to give up the necklace, which was duly restored to Freya. (Guerber 1992: 150)

There may have been a distinction between the idea of the girdle of the earth and the necklace. In the first case the trees and verdure would have been the clothing of the earth, but this could have existed side by side with the idea that the rainbow was her necklace.

¹⁵ Eormenric (great king) might here refer to Lodur (Loki) the god or king of the underworld.

¹⁶ Lauma shares certain characteristics with Berchta and Holda (Grimm 2004: 1369).

¹⁷ Is it justifiable that Heimdall could also be a god of water? Heimdall's name Vindhler means 'wind-sea' (though probably a reference to the sky) and his nine mothers seem to be equivalent to the nine daughters of Aegir. The Moon was viewed to have descended under the waves just as the Sun was thought to bathe in the waters. Regarding the rivalry between Loki and Heimdall, fire was seen as 'wind's companion' because blowing on a fire causes it to stir, while water was 'fire's enemy' because it puts it out (Grimm 2004: 1462).

Conclusion

The first apparent European goddess was known in Germany as Berchta (bright) and Holda (propitious). They might typify the dual goddess of bright and gloomy: Berchta and Holda, Frigg and Hel, Freyia and Hyndla. Berchta arose as a goddess of the Sun, mentioned first by Caesar, and Holda appeared as representative of the earth, but indications are that they were interchangeable, so encompassed both aspects. She received the souls of the dead who rode along the path of the sky, the Milky Way, in a wagon into the underworld. Both the Queen and the *huldren* made appearances on the earth and were closely associated with the elves and dwarfs who were the souls of the dead. She held her position until the arrival of the sky god (Tyr or Odin), which continued her role as only an earth and fertility goddess. Her presence in Europe was ultimately replaced in the Christian religion by the 'Mother of God' or a saint.

The necklace of the goddess of the North may have initially arisen from either the view that vegetation was the clothing or girdle of the earth or that it was the rainbow, appearing after a contest between the gods of water and fire in a thunderstorm. This would have been related to women because the necklace was already considered a female symbol.

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