

## THE GREAT GODDESS OF THE NORTH

Lotte Motz  
Oxford, England

In studies of religion and mythology the figure of a Great Goddess is frequently discussed. She is often recognized in the imperious and violent deities of Middle Eastern tradition: Anat, Ishtar-Inanna, or Astarte<sup>1</sup>. Another form of the Great Goddess has been postulated as an archetype. She is said to have existed in a pre-patriarchal society and to have embodied the prime forces of life, birth, death and regeneration. She ruled supremely, but she was robbed of her powers by a male-dominated group of warrior gods.

In the present study the term Great Goddess does not pertain to the reconstructed archetype but to a female godhead of great stature, as exemplified by the Mediterranean divinities. In the definition of this essay such a goddess is a many-layered creature who does not belong to the faith of simple men. She arises when smaller communities have been gathered to form a kingdom or a state, and many local deities have merged in her persona. From the close protector of a village lad she has become the companion of a king. The entrance of foreign forces and influences from abroad would have worked their way upon the figure. Intellectuals and priests would have left their imprint on her shape.

In this paper I wish to trace this kind of deity among the Germanic peoples. A superficial glance does not reveal the existence of a Great Goddess in the Germanic realm. Tacitus of the first century speaks of the three great male gods, Mars, Mercury, and Hercules. Adam of Bremen of the eleventh century names the male gods Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr. Yet Tacitus describes the ritual of the goddess Nerthus more fully than the ritual of other gods. A day of the week bears the name of the goddess Frigg. Place names in Scandinavia testify to honor rendered to the goddess Freyja. It may be that the form of a Great Goddess has merely become obscured. Closer examination indeed reveals a female deity of great stature in three main forms and in three main areas of the Germanic world: Freyja linked with areas of Sweden, Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr with the Hlaðir jarls of Norway, and Percht-Holda with the peoples of the continental mainland.

The lands inhabited by the Germanic peoples are not uniform in character. The southern continental portions are fertile and here agriculture has been practiced since the Neolithic. The coast line of Sweden is favorable to sea faring and here trading and important trading centres were developed. Further north agriculture ceases and the areas give sustenance to flocks and herds. Even further north the region becomes more hostile to human habitation, and frost and cold more menacing and deadly. We may expect that more nations entered and settled in the southern provinces bringing with them their technical and cultural traditions. The northern portions of Scandinavia might therefore have preserved a more archaic form of religious faith. In the study at hand I concentrate on the Norwegian manifestation of the deity, the friend and protectress of the Hlaðir jarls.

Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr does not belong to the family of Eddic gods. One sentence only is devoted to her in Snorri's Edda. He states that she was the daughter of King Hölggi after whom Hálógaland is named and that she, as well as her father received sacrifices in their honor (sk 44). We thus know that she belonged to the northern part of Norway and that she was worshipped as a divinity. References in the sagas show her close alliance with the Hlaðir jarls who ruled the northern areas<sup>2</sup>.

Her temple stands in a clearing of a forest; it is surrounded by a wooden fence and richly decorated with gold and silver carvings. The image of the goddess, in turn, is adorned in a costly manner. Into this sanctuary Jarl Hakon leads his friend Sigmundr Brestason before the latter sets out on a dangerous journey. Through gifts the Jarl shows his devotion to the goddess and tells his friend to do the same. If she is kindly inclined she will allow it that a ring is taken from her wrist. And, indeed, the Lady is, eventually, gracious to Sigmundr<sup>3</sup>.

In a bitter moment of his life, when the Jarl must face his enemy in battle (at Hjörundavagr) the Jarl prostrates before before his fulltrúa, his fully faithful friend, and implores her for her help. She is not moved by his promise of gold and silver, nor by his promise of the lives of many men, but she yields to his entreaties when he offers her the life of his young son, aged seven. As the battle starts the sky darkens, lightning flashes, thunder sounds, and Þorgerðr and her sister are apparent in the midst of carnage. It seems as if an arrow issued from every finger and that every arrow took a man<sup>4</sup>.

Then I heard the storm of Hölgabrúðr / raging  
grimly from the North / rained hail onto men's  
shields, / here sky stones battered the fierce  
eyed warriors / to cause bitter death.

In another episode the Jarl turns to the goddess when he wishes to avenge a slight. Through her magic powers she endows a piece of wood with life, equips the man with a spear, and sends him on his journey. And, indeed, he kills the offender and thus avenges the insult to the Jarl<sup>5</sup>.

The worship of Þorgerðr was also brought to Iceland. Here too a sanctuary was erected for her in a clearing, and here she was honored together with Þorr in his carriage and her sister Irpa. This temple was later burned by an angry settler<sup>6</sup>.

Þorgerðr's importance to pagan faith is affirmed by the fury of Óláfr Tryggvason, the Christian king who defeated Jarl Hakon. He set fire to her temple and dispersed her treasure in his missionary zeal<sup>7</sup>.

Since the divine stature of Þorgerðr is assured by her sanctuary, her acceptance of sacrifice, her powerful help, and the wrath of the Church, and since she was not a goddess of the Eddic pantheon, we must assume that Eddic myth does not encompass all there is to north-Germanic religion. The study of Þorgerðr thus would allow us a glimpse into beliefs which are ignored in the poems and prose of Eddic myth and show us a godhead of a different faith<sup>8</sup>.

While Þorgerðr is not a member of the family of the gods she clearly is a member of the family of giants. Her name is listed by Snorri Sturluson in his enumeration of giantesses<sup>9</sup>.

Ketils saga haegns relates that she hastens to attend a meeting of the trolls, a trollabing, where the mightiest of the trolls will meet (the term for trolls, troll, and giants, jötnar, interchanges in the texts)<sup>10</sup>. Sometimes she also bears the designation Hörgatroll<sup>11</sup>. A giantess may be incorporated into the household of the gods through marriage, as were Skaði and Gerðr; Þorgerðr was not assimilated in this way.

Neglected, as she is by Eddic myth, we know her only in a cultic aspect, i.e., in her relationship with men. We do not know of her traffic with other gods or her adventures. In the sagas, conversely, we frequently encounter giantesses, outside of a cultic context and embedded in story matter, who are vividly described. It is possible that the myths of the goddess-giantess Þorgerðr were retained in a literary setting concerning other members of her family. These too might have had a place in faith and physical locations may be named after a troll-woman<sup>12</sup>. We shall now try to ascertain whether any of Þorgerðr's qualities may be affirmed and more fully shown through her sisters in the sagas.

### Habitation

Like Þorgerðr giantesses of the sagas are usually related to a specific dwelling place and usually, like Þorgerðr's, it lies in the North. Some giantesses are stationed in the very lands of the Hlaðir Jarls: Gandriðr, Friðr, Flaumgerðr in Dofrafjall (Trondelag) and Guðrún, Þordís, Bimyrja, Eisa, Glöd in Hálogaland. Yet more giantesses have their homes in the northern regions: Brana, Hrimgerðr, Sleggja in the Polar lands, Gnípa, Geit, Syrpa, Glamdís, Hergerðr in Greenland, Töglð, Geirriðr, Gríðr on the shores of the White Sea, Hrafnhildr, Hildigunnr in Finmark. Few giantesses live in the South, and the Arctic Ocean received the name: Trollebotn - sea of the trolls<sup>13</sup>. Here Þorgerðr finds her residence according to a later ballad<sup>14</sup>.

### Names

The name Gerðr recurs among the appellation of the spirits. We find Gerðr, Amgerðr, Flaumgerðr, Hergerðr, Hrimgerðr, Ímgerðr, Margerðr, Skrángerðr, Ungerðr<sup>15</sup>. The name Lathgerða is cited by Saxo Grammaticus in his book on Danish history and it may be rendered as: Gerðr of the Hlaðir<sup>16</sup>. The name Gerðr may be traced to an Indo-European root \*gherd- with a basic meaning of 'to enclose', as apparent in the Old Norse noun garðr, 'enclosure', and the Norwegian noun gjerde - 'fence'. On the basis of this root the name may be interpreted as 'the one enclosed' or as 'encloser' i.e. 'protector'<sup>17</sup>. Þorgerðr's name emphasizes her closeness to the saga spirits.

### The Weather

Þorgerðr's storm rages from the North and hail stones fall from heaven when she aids her human friend in battle. Powers over the elements, especially the elements of storm and cold, are also held by others of her race: a troll-woman sends her friends good sailing wind (Sturlaug's s. starfsama); snow begins to fall when Grímr is approached by giant-women (Gríms s. loðinkinna); Illugi experiences an intensity of cold as he meets a giantess (Illuga s. Gríðar-fóstra); a river is whipped by hail and lashed by tempests sent by giant-women (þd. 5,8). A

giantess may herself bear a name of an element of wintertime, such as Mjöll, Drífa, and Fönn, all meaning 'snow', and thus be identified with a phenomenon of wintertime<sup>18</sup>.

### Skills in Warfare

In the battle of Hjörundavágr Þorgerðr herself stands in the midst of bloodshed. Her saga sisters are indeed skilled and gifted fighters: they wield such arms as a sword, skálm, (Sörla s. sterka), a pike, atgeirr (Sturlaugs s. starfsama), a spiked club, gaddakylfa (Illuga s. Tagldarbana), a knife, sax (Hálfðanar s. Brönufóstra)<sup>19</sup>. The battle against a troll-woman is sometimes fiercer and more dangerous than the battle against a giant, as in the case of Mána (Sörla s. sterka) or Sleggja (Hálfðanar s. Brönufóstra). And battle-axes are equated with troll-women - öxar kalla menn tröllkvinna heitum (sk. 48). A giantess' name, such as Gunnlöð, gunnr, 'battle', or Hrafnhildr, hildr, 'battle', point to the warlike nature of the spirits<sup>20</sup>.

### Alliances and Magic Powers

The second part of Þorgerðr's name, brúðr, has the meaning 'bride', and it marks her as a young woman and as an erotic being, though we find her in no overtly erotic relationship in the texts<sup>21</sup>. In the sagas a giantess is frequently related in sexual union to a human hero, and she may bear the hero's child. Such is the fate of Fríðr who dallied with Búi (Kjalnesinga s.) and of Hildigunr who is embraced by Örvar-Oddr (Örvar-Odds s.). Snorri cites Þorgerðr together with her father; and this too, a father - daughter pair, emerges in the tales about the family of giants<sup>22</sup>. We thus meet Dorfi and his daughter Fríð (Kjalnesinga s.) or Brúni and his daughter Hrafnhildr (Ketils s. haengs). As Þorgerðr employs her magic powers to endow a piece of wood with life, so a giantess may employ her magic powers to restore a mortally wounded man to health (Þorsteins s. Geirnefufóstra), or to protect him through her gifts (Hálfðanar s. Brönufóstra)<sup>23</sup>.

### Protection of Human Hero

Strongly marked in the life pattern of giantess is her protective alliance with a human hero whom she may guide through life. He usually meets her in the travels of his youth in great distance from his home. Sometimes she tests his strength through her physical assault, and when she is defeated and she has been granted mercy she becomes his loyal friend. Sometimes she finds him in agony or close to death and she heals his wounds. A troll-woman, riding on a wolf, offered Heðinn her help in combat as he was passing through a forest (HHj, prose). She may become his mistress or shield him only as a friend. When he leaves her dwelling she may bestow him rich parting gifts. Thus Mána offered Sörli armour which could not be cut by weapons and a sword which could pierce steel and stone. Brana built a boat for Hálfðan, the father of her child, which was always followed by a favorable wind<sup>24</sup>.

Sometimes the alliance is sealed with a formal promise, as between Ásmundr and Hergerðr; she declared: «Spare my life and I will be your friend.»<sup>25</sup> Thus she saved Ásmundr from drowning when his ship was broken in a storm (Ásmundar s. Atlasonar). A man's name sometimes indicates that he has gained the guidance and protection of a giantess, as did

Þorsteinn Geirnefjufóstri. In alliances of this kind we find the most striking of the analogies to the life pattern of Þorgerðr Hölgabruðr and her loyalty to her human friend.

Þorgerðr might share yet more aspects with her sisters in the tales. Like these she might have the ability to transform herself into a beast. Like these she might be connected with the flocks and herds of pastoral existence. These features, however, are not presented and she might have lost many of her animal alliances<sup>26</sup>.

We have found that the elements which make up the persona of Þorgerðr Hölgabruðr possess a counterpart in the giantesses of the tales. These are preserved in a story context, but they must have been modeled on the daimons of the landscape which were revered by the local population<sup>27</sup>. When the communities were united to form a kingdom, governed by a single ruler, one spirit rose to national stature. She no longer lived in a mountain or a mountain cave, but in a temple built for her by men. Her forest sanctuary may be a testimony to her origin in the wilderness. Much gold and silver was rendered to the deity and she herself was represented by a man-made form. We do not know what sacrifices were rendered to the woodland spirits, but it is clear that Þorgerðr received as offering besides gold and treasure also the lives of men.

The North of Scandinavia, as noted earlier, was less open to foreign influences than the South. Here we may expect to meet a more northerly, more archaic kind of religion. We have been able to ascertain one element of such a faith: a Great Goddess who arose out of the local spirits of the North, deeply embedded in the northern landscape, a fierce fighter, a recipient of human sacrifice, and the loyal protectress of a king.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chadwick, Nora K. 1950. «Þorgerðr Hölgabruðr and the Trolle-thing.» in: The Early Cultures of North-West Europe. H.M. Chadwick Memorial Studies. Cambridge: 397-41.
- Davidson, Daphne. 1984. Jarl Hakon and his Poets. Oxford Univ. Dissert.
- Helck, Wolfgang. 1971. Betrachtungen zur grossen Göttin und den ihr verbundenen Götterheiten. Wien-München.
- Hultkrantz, Åke, ed. 1961. The supernatural Owners of Nature. Stockholm.
- Motz, Lotte. 1981, a. «Giantesses and their Names.» Frühmittelalterliche Studien 15: 83-108.
- Motz, Lotte. 1984, b. «Gerðr: a new interpretation of the Lay of Skirnir.» Maal og Minne: 121-46.
- Motz, Lotte. 1984, a. «Giants and Giantesses.» Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik 22: 83-108.

Motz, Lotte. 1984, b. «Gods and Demons of the Wilderness: a study in Norse tradition.» Arkiv för nordisk filologi 99: 175-87.

Motz, Lotte. 1987. «The Divided Image.» The Mankind Quarterly, 463-78.

Motz, Lotte. 1993. The Beauty and the Hag. Wien.

Saxo Grammaticus. 1979. The History of the Danes. P. Fischer, transl. Hilda Ellis Davidson, ed. Cambridge.

Steinsland, Gro. 1991. Det hellige bryllaup og norrøn kongeideologi. Oslo.

Ström, Gustav. 1883. «Om Þorgerð Hólgabrud.» Arkiv för nordisk filologi 2:124-35.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Helck.

<sup>2</sup> During the ninth century the Jarls of Hlaðe rose to prominence from their base in Hálogaland and extended their rule southwards. They attained virtual sovereignty over northern Norway during the reign of Haraldr hárfagri and Hakon goði. After 974 A.D. Jarl Hakon executed full sovereignty over almost all of Norway. He was the last of the pagan rulers and a staunch upholder of pagan faith until he was defeated by Óláfr Tryggvason and killed by his own thrall. (Davidson).

<sup>3</sup> Flat I, 144-45; Færeyinga þátr, ch.23.

<sup>4</sup> Jomsvikinga saga, ch. 34. The poem is by Bjarni Kolbeinsson, skj II, 7, 32. The battle of Hjörundavagr was between Jarl Hakon and Wendish troops. Legendary tradition transformed these forces into the «Jomsvikings», supposedly a group of professional warriors.

<sup>5</sup> Flat I, 213; Óláfs s. Tryggvasonar, ch. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Harbar saga ok Hólmverja, ch. 19; her sanctuary in Norway also was destroyed by an angry man, according to Njáls s. ch. 88.

<sup>7</sup> Óláfs saga helga, ch. 112; HKR

<sup>8</sup> The figure of Þorgerð has been discussed by Norah Chadwick. She believes that the Jarl had relations with two women, one human, Þora (who was in fact his mistress) and one superhuman: Þorgerð, for such was the pattern of archaic faith. Gro Steinsland finds a different context: according to this the king or god must marry a giantess in order to create a royal line. To her Þorgerð and Helgi are the original ancestors of the Hlaðir jarls, later supplanted by Óðinn and Skáði; Steinsland 220-25. Gustav Ström believes that Þorgerð was a goddess rather than a giantess. Since she was a figure of the North she was fused with trolls and giants in later time because these live traditionally in the North. He deduces her importance from the many places where she is remembered, e.g., skaldic poems by Tindr Hallkelsson, Þorkell Gíslason, Bjarni Kolbeinsson, the Norwegian ballad of Aasmund Fraegdagaevar, the Icelandic tale of Flagdaeva hölda.

<sup>9</sup> Edda Snorra, bulur, tröllkvenna heiti.

<sup>10</sup> Ketils s. haenga, ch. 3.

<sup>11</sup> The name Hörga-troll is given to her in Jomsvikinga s. and in Ketils s. haenga; she is named Torgerð Hukebrud in a later ballad, cited by Steinsland 222.

<sup>12</sup> Such as Hítardalur in Iceland, home of Hít; Bárbar s. Snaefellsáss; ch. 13. For giantesses as part of faith, see Motz 1984 b, 1993, 60-87.

<sup>13</sup> Motz 1987 a, 472, fn 13.

<sup>14</sup> Steinsland 222.

<sup>15</sup> For a systematic listing of giantesses' names, see Motz 1981 a.

<sup>16</sup> Saxo, Book IX, as cited by Chadwick 414.

<sup>17</sup> In 1909 Olsen suggested the meaning 'fenced in field, fertile earth' as interpretation of the name. He sees the giantess Gerðr as the personification of the fertile earth. Yet the meaning of 'fertility' cannot be detected in the noun or in any of its congeners. Motz 1984 a, 93-95.

<sup>18</sup> These women are the daughters of King Snaer - 'snow'.

<sup>19</sup> Motz 1987, 469, fn 58; Motz 1984 a, 93-95.

<sup>20</sup> Motz 1981 a, 500-01.

<sup>21</sup> Only one poem may show a reference to erotic dealings between the Jarl and the giantess. Tindr Hallkelsson skj I, 136 states describing the Jarl's station in battle: 'It is not as of Gerðr made a bed for you in her arms'.

---

<sup>22</sup> Motz 1984 a, 86-7.

<sup>23</sup> Motz 1984 a, 90-91.

<sup>24</sup> Motz 1993, 60-4.

<sup>25</sup> Ásmundar saga Atlaonar, ch. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Forað of Ketils saga haenngs may change into a whale; Skinnhúfa and Vargeisa turn into vultures (Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis); Motz 1984 a, 96-97. Arinnefja is the mistress of a flock of goates (Egils s. einhenda); Motz 1987 fn 53.

<sup>27</sup> Such spirits have recently been designated as Owners and Guardians of Nature; Hultkrantz 1961; Motz 1984 b.