

PART III

THE NORTHERN EUROPEAN AND
NORDIC CULTURES

CHAPTER 11

THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN AND NORDIC FORMS OF WORSHIP

A review of the religious practices of the polytheistic Norse people and the Old Kingdom Egyptians shows several notable parallels that indicate a possible, if distant, relationship between the two. Here, a theoretical model for a relationship between the two cultures, beginning in both a hypothetical common ethnic origin prior to the late fourth millennium B.C., and a transmission of Mediterranean religious ideas to the north via Etruria in the first millennium B.C., is presented, along with an overview of the linguistic and religious parallels.

The idea of a relationship between the Egyptian-Sumerian-Harappan culture family and Aryan culture has been explored since the 19th century. The idea of a link of the two via Sumeria has been treated as likely in mainstream scholarly circles since the early 20th century. Such a link is noted as a fact by historian William H McNeill in his 1950s bestseller *Rise of the West*, wherein he states that “the . . . Aryans possessed a relatively sophisticated theology and well-organized priesthood, both of which seem to have taken shape under the influence of contact with Sumerian and Babylonian religious ideas,” and continues in the footnote: “Merchants and metalworkers traveling from the mountain zone of the Middle East northward into the steppes certainly taught the primitive Indo-Europeans a great deal—e.g., the Indo-Europeans’ term for copper derived from the Sumerian name for that metal. Religious as well as material lessons must also have been learned from representatives of what was, after all, a more sophisticated culture . . . for resemblances between Indo-European and Mesopotamian pantheons are too great to be accidental.”

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

However, where McNeill errs is in his assumption that the Indo-European ideas are derivative of the Mesopotamian, and not *vice versa*. As we shall discuss, the northern form of religion is part of a complex interplay between the north and the cultures of the Near East.

MEDIATION VIA ETRURIA

In addition to a possible common origin of the Indo-European and proto-Indo-European peoples, there is evidence of a second wave of contact between the far north and the Mediterranean. In this second wave of contact religious ideas were transmitted to Germany and Scandinavia via Etruria. The Etruscan cities were major trading partners with the north, and the Carthaginian and Semitic merchant colonies that established themselves in those cities were the major dealers of Nordic amber among the Mediterranean peoples. Thus, some transmission of ideas occurred. Which way ideas were transmitted is not clear.⁵⁰⁶

The Etruscan and Nordic peoples both refer to their gods as the Aesir, and they are unique in doing so – even if the term is related, as is argued here, to the Ashemu of Horus and to the larger Indo-European myth of the smiths. Like the Nordic people, the Tyrrhenians – another name for the Etruscans—believed that they migrated to their new homeland after being driven out of an older homeland by starvation. Further, in the Nordic religion, at some point, the worship of the chief god Thor was supplanted by the worship of the god Odin, who, as discussed below, appears to be related to the Egyptian Osiris. At this time, the worship of the god Tyr, who should fill Odin's place, appears to have ended. An Etruscan mediation of Egyptian religion would explain this discrepancy.

The Nordic religion is also known for its triple hierarchy of gods: The Aesir, the Vanir, and the Elves-Giants.⁵⁰⁷ The Nordic Loki, in his imprisonment

⁵⁰⁶The Etruscans are treated with in detail in Chapter 6.

⁵⁰⁷The true giants are likely distinct from the elves, but the race of elf-smiths are often described

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

beneath the earth, is identical to the Greek Typhon. The Nordic Idunn, who guards the apples of youth at the life-tree in the garden, is similar to the idea of the serpent and the tree found in the Near East. And the story of the Nordic flood is very similar to both the story of the Akkadian Atrahasis and the Greek account of Deucalion. An effort has been made to derive these stories from a later Classical and Hebraic-Christian impact on the north, but these efforts have been notoriously inadequate.⁵⁰⁸

HOR AND THOR, OSIR AND AESIR

Both the Sumerians and the Egyptians originally worshipped a sky-deity who was also a warrior. In Egypt, this deity was Hr, or Hor.⁵⁰⁹ Hor is first known in Egypt in the fifth millennium B.C., simultaneous with the establishment of Sumerian culture, and quickly rose to become the chief god of the southern Egyptian peoples. The followers of Hor conquered the northern Egyptian Semites and subjected them approximately 3000 BC, and Hor was the chief god of Egypt – with Seth sometimes being raised to his equal – until the foundation of the Fourth Dynasty, when he was largely supplanted by Re and Osiris. It is reasonable to believe that “hr,” or “Hor,” the name of the Egyptian deity of the southern, white European peoples, is identical to the Nordic Thor. In this regard, it should be noted Thor’s name is not identical to that of the general Indo-European sky father *Diw-, which is represented by Tyr or Tiw in the Germanic north, though his function is identical to that sky-father, in that he is the god of war, of lightning and of fertility. Thus the name “Thor” must have been brought to the Nordic peoples after the division of

as giants in the extant texts.

⁵⁰⁸Real, wholesale Christianization is evident in several histories, but never through the subtle interweaving of motifs. Usually, the story is simply rewritten, to varying degrees of clumsiness. The syncretisms seen in, say, the Eddas, are of some antiquity. The question is really one of, “how much?”

⁵⁰⁹The Greek declension gives us Horus, but this declension does not exist in Egyptian, which is not an Indo-European language.

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

the Indo-European peoples into European and Asiatic branches. An Etruscan mediation of the Egyptian religion would explain both the antiquity and relative recency of Thor's name.

One of the sections of the Nordic pantheon was the Aesir, which were the set of gods led by Odin and which included Thor. Egyptian parallels to this appear in the name of the god the Greeks called Osiris, who is, in Egyptian, Wsir, or "Asir."⁵¹⁰ To refer to gods as the "Aesir" is unique to the Nordic and the Etrurian religions. The Etruscans are known to have taken their religion from the civilization of the Great Mother, but also appear to have had a pre-Semitic religious form, possibly derived from Egypt. As such, as with Thor, a hypothesis of Etruscan mediation of Egyptian religion to the north is very possible.

ORVANDIL'S AND OSIRIS' TOES

There are also astrotheological parallels. The Pyramid Texts refer to a constellation known as Osiris's toe; in the Nordic tradition this was the toe of Orvandil. Both are associated with the archer Orion in late Classical sources.⁵¹¹ There are also Egyptian myths about the laming of Seth through the tearing of his thigh by Horus, and several references to acts of worship dedicated to or underneath a thigh that seem to indicate a constellation, rather than a literal part of a leg. These myths have parallels in the laming themes that appear in the Nordic Eddas and North German semi-mythological histories of the Dark and early Middle Ages,⁵¹² and which appear to have their origins in the mythic cycles surrounding Baldur and surrounding Hyuki.⁵¹³

⁵¹⁰The vowel represented by the W is generally reduced to "o", but this "o" may reasonably be transformed to "a" both in some cases of Egyptian, and in its transmission to the north.

⁵¹¹This is part of a complex series of syncretisms of Osiris that are not necessarily consistent. Osiris is also equated with Dionysius, who shares little if anything in common with Orion.

⁵¹²And may also be related to the laming of Jacob during his wrestling match with Yahweh.

⁵¹³Throughout the Eddas, the Skaldic poetry, and the works of historians such as Saxo Grammaticus, we find tales of characters injuring their thighs, as well as characters losing hands

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

THE JUDGMENT OF THE DEAD BY ODIN AND OSIRIS

The clearest link between Egyptian and Nordic myth comes from the judgment of the dead the Lower Thingstead, which the Swedish mythologist Viktor Rydberg pieced together.⁵¹⁴ from his investigations into Nordic myth. This judgment is identical to the Egyptian judgment of the soul found in the Book of the Dead.

Rydberg's investigation was intended to prove that one did not have to fall by the sword in the northern countries in order to win a place in Valhalla.⁵¹⁵ This led to an extensive investigation of the traditions of what occurred after death in the pagan Nordic and Germanic countries, including England. What Rydberg ended up proving was that there was a home of the blessed dead that do not die in battle, and that these blessed dead are selected by a judgment held at the Lower Thingstead – the Court of Odin at the Well of Urd, underneath one of the roots of Yggdrasil, the life tree.

What Rydberg explains is that the Lower Thing⁵¹⁶ is held daily at Urd's well. There, the deceased may not speak unless they have, prior to death, received the *malrunar*, or “speech-runes,” which allow the dead to speak in their own defense. At the Thing Odin awards the *ordstirr*, or judgment upon one dead, which is the reputation which will live forever for the man.⁵¹⁷ Men are brought there by their *dis*—the *hamingja*, or female being who has acted as their guardian spirit, and who speaks for them before Odin. This *hamingja*

or feet, or receiving other “laming” injuries. Many of these have a similar structure to that of the Egyptians myth of the battle of Horus and Seth.

⁵¹⁴In his *Teutonic Mythology*, originally published in Swedish in two volumes in the late 19th century, now available in five assorted volumes in English in the 21st century.

⁵¹⁵Rydberg was incorrect in this assertion. But his desire to prove it yielded pleasant results.

⁵¹⁶A “thing,” like the Latin *res publica*, was a public meeting to discuss the business of the community – what we would call a political meeting.

⁵¹⁷The “fame of the dead man's deeds, as it is typically translated from the *Havamal*. Rydberg shows that this is not temporal fame, but the recordation of the deeds of the man as known to Odin, who knows all.

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

may have abandoned the deceased during life, in which case the deceased is definitely doomed.⁵¹⁸ The dead arrive with the material goods that they bore with them to their graves.⁵¹⁹ Those who are judged favorably go on to the glittering plains of the happy dead,⁵²⁰ or join Odin in his hall of Valhalla to battle forever until the end of the world.⁵²¹ Those who are judged unfavorably are thrown to the corpse-devouring monster Nidhogg to die a second death and be eternally punished in the realm of Nifelhel.

In all essential points, this is the tale of the judgment of the deceased known to us through the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, and as practiced in the pyramid burials.

The dead Egyptian⁵²² was conducted into the duat, or underworld, where he comes, after passage through a series of gates barred by demons and a variety of underworld locations, to the hall of Osiris. With him was his *ba*, a bird with a woman's head, who speaks for him on his behalf if, because of a failure to prepare his tomb, he was unable to speak for himself. However, within his tomb, on the walls of his pyramid, on his coffin, or on a scroll left for him, were the magic formulas he could use to loosen his tongue, and thus appear before Osiris and issue the denial of various acts of wrongdoing.⁵²³ All the major gods were present. Anubis places the dead man's heart upon the scales, where it was weighed against the feather of Ma'at. Thoth records the proceedings. If the man is judged wanting, or if he appeared without his *ba*, he is thrown to

⁵¹⁸*ec qued alffima ordnar ther disir.*

⁵¹⁹Thus the importance of grave shoes, and to bury a warrior with his sword and armor.

⁵²⁰In which is found the grove of Mimir.

⁵²¹Rydberg argues that evil men who fall in battle do not join Odin, but are judged and doomed to destruction. There is some tradition to support this.

⁵²²Originally the pharaoh but later extended to the nobility and to all the people.

⁵²³This denial was formulaic, involved 42 statements, and was ritualistic in nature, in that there was little indication it had to have basis in the real actions of the individual. Much of Egyptian religion was based on magical formulas, which could command the gods, rather than the ethical system by which modern religion is generally understood.

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

the demon Amemet⁵²⁴ to die a second death and be devoured. If he is found worthy, he either accompanies Re on his barge to battle until the end of the world against the demons who try to prevent the Sun from rising, or goes on to one of the blessed places in the duat.

Obviously this is, step by step, the identical tradition, expressed in two cultures that have not been previously closely related. The similarity of these two traditions is enough to make all the other, less conclusive, similarities between the two much more likely.⁵²⁵ Even the bifurcated nature of the afterlife for the blessed – the separate blessed afterlife for the warrior and for the non-warrior – is a unique element unknown in the larger Indo-European tradition.

There is really no way to taint this conclusion. Unlike similarities that can be explained by contamination from Hebraic literature that drew upon the Egyptian mythos, the Egyptian myths upon which the judgment of the lower thingstead is drawn were unknown during the period when the Eddic and Skaldic literature was composed,⁵²⁶ and thus to those who recorded the fragments of myth in which this tradition was preserved. While it is possible Rydberg had knowledge of the *Book of the Dead*, as the first translation of this Egyptian work was published in 1845, he specifically, in the second volume of his *Teutonic Mythology*, in the conclusion to his section on *Germanic Myths of Proto-Indo-European Origin*, declaims any effort to draw parallels between Egyptian and Indo-European myth forms, stating that there “is the impossibility of discovering a congruence comparable in the slightest degree between the

⁵²⁴Discussed in Chapters 8 and 9.

⁵²⁵Just because two things in disparate cultures are similar, that does not prove a relationship, unless some link between the two cultures can be established, in which case the similarity should be assumed unless it can be disproven. This is one of Rydberg's postulates for the study of myth and culture.

⁵²⁶Knowledge of hieroglyphic and hieratic literature disappeared after no later than the fourth century A.D. and did not re-emerge until the 19th century. The actual composition of our extant Eddic and Skaldic poetry is generally between the 5th and 12th centuries A.D. The general assertion is that scholars educated by the Catholic Church and crusading priests and missionaries altered the form of Nordic poetry during the Dark Ages after Rome, but this similarity could not have been introduced during that period.

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

Indo-European cycle of myths and non-Indo-European cycles.” Thus, Rydberg was unaware of the parallels that existed between his interpretations of the Nordic texts and the Egyptian form of worship.

FRODE-FREYR AND OSTARA-FREYJA

In addition to the mediation of certain ideas via Etruria, the Gothic peoples, who migrated to Thrace from Scandinavia in prehistory, then returned to western and northern Europe during the collapse of the Roman empire, seem to have brought with them the worship of Freyr, the figure that the Goths knew as Zalmoxis.

As noted above in Chapter 9, *Ynglingsaga* 12 tells us that:

Frey fell into a sickness, and as his illness took the upper hand, his men took the plan of letting few approach him. In the meantime they raised a great mound, in which they placed a door with three holes in it. Now when Frey died they bore him secretly into the mound, but told the Swedes that he was alive; and they kept watch over him for three years. They brought all the taxes into the mound, and through the one hole they put in the gold, through the other silver, and through the third the copper money that was paid. Peace and good seasons continued.

This story is mirrored in historical accounts of kings such as Frode III in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* 5.16.3, where we are told that:

So ended Frode, the most famous king in the whole world. The nobles, when he had been disembowelled, had his body kept embalmed for three years, for they feared the provinces would rise if the king's end were published. They wished his death to be concealed above all from foreigners, so that by the pretence that he was alive they might preserve the boundaries of the empire, which had been extended for so long; and that, on the strength of

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

the ancient authority of their general, they might exact the usual tribute from their subjects. So, the lifeless corpse was carried away by them in such a way that it seemed to be taken, not in a funeral bier, but in a royal carriage, as if it were a due and proper tribute from the soldiers to an infirm old man not in full possession of his forces. Such splendor did his friends bestow on him even in death. But when his limbs rotted, and were seized with extreme decay, and when the corruption could not be arrested, they buried his body with a royal funeral in a barrow near Waere, a bridge of Zealand; declaring that Frode had desired to die and be buried in what was thought the chief province of his kingdom.

The themes of this myth, including the buried treasure horde within the mound of the king, permeate Nordic legend, including the cycle of tales that surrounds the Gothic king Hermanaric, and are clearly derived from the legend of Zalmoxis given in Herodotus' *Histories* iv, 94-96:

Zalmoxis, therefore, who by his commerce with the Greeks, and especially with one who was by no means their most contemptible philosopher, Pythagoras to wit, was acquainted with the Ionic mode of life and with manners more refined than those current among his countrymen, had a chamber built, in which from time to time he received and feasted all the principal Thracians, using the occasion to teach them that neither he, not they, his boon companions, nor any of their posterity would ever perish, but that they would all go to a place where they would live for aye in the enjoyment of every conceivable good. While he was acting in this way, and holding this kind of discourse, he was constructing an apartment underground, into which, when it was completed, he withdrew, vanishing suddenly from the eyes of the Thracians, who greatly regretted his loss, and mourned over him as one dead. He meanwhile abode in his secret chamber three full years, after which he came forth from his concealment, and showed himself once more to his countrymen, who were thus brought

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

to believe in the truth of what he had taught them. Such is the account of the Greeks.

Zalmoxis is the consort of the Great Mother, and his name is derived from a corruption of the term “Cybele’s Zeus.” Freyr, we are told, was depicted in the manner of the Egyptian God Min,⁵²⁷ with an erect phallus. We are also told throughout Saxo that Freyr was worshipped “at Upsala, [with] effeminate gestures and the clapping of the mimes on the stage, and by the unmanly clatter of the bells,” along with human sacrifice. Dumézil has further suggested that the worship of Freyr was conducted by priests dressed as women and wearing wigs of women’s hair.⁵²⁸ All of this cements Freyr as being the consort of the Great Mother.

With Freyr, we find his consort Freyja, who gives every appearance of being the “lust” aspect of the goddess Ishtar – the Hathor and Aphrodite of the Egyptian and Classical world. That Ishtar was known among the southern Teurons as Ostara has been well established. From her worship, we get the word “Easter”,⁵²⁹ and the substitution of “Ost”, “Eost” and “East” into her name is suggestive of the Eastern origin of the goddess. Our modern Easter bunny is a variant of the idea of the resurrected god, being a bunny who was once a bird, but which died when Eostore failed to bring the spring on time, and was brought back to life by her, as a bunny who, retaining his bird nature, can lay eggs.

AGNI, THE SACRED FIRE

In addition to the judgment at the Lower Thingstead, there are parallels between the Egyptian religious understanding of fire and the fire gods of the Nordic myth cycle. In both religions, fire is associated with fertility, as it was

⁵²⁷For the significance of the goat-god Min see Chapters 10 and 12.

⁵²⁸In his *Haddingus*.

⁵²⁹Via Anglo-Saxon Eostore.

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

in the Vedas and the religion of Zoroaster.

Fire, or “khet,” is seen in the Pyramid Texts as the generating force, related to the growth and sustenance of life. In the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, we are told that She-Sisi is a city located in sekhet-sisi, the lake of fire, with the later implication that crops are grown in this lake. In the Pyramid Texts, the deceased king, elevated to godhood, is said to feast upon what is produced by the fiery lake. Similarly, in line 629 of the text found in the pyramid of King Unas, where the king is bragging of his ability to rape the wives of the man he captures and slays, the king says he will reap their grain and take the wives away into the palace of Isis, who is beloved of Unas, and who will accept his “fire,” a term which clearly relates to Unas’s semen, as the sentence which precedes it is, translated politely, “Unas will copulate with them with his phallus.” The idea of the generative fire also encompasses the idea of the akhet, or horizon, the shining or glimmering of light at first dawn and the place in the underworld from which that light emerges. The akhet is the home of Horus and is the first manifestation of Re, the Sun god, during his daily cycle.

Fire and fertility are linked in Nordic conception of divinity and the Aryan conception of the gods in general. In his chapter on the idea of the sacred fire, Rydberg, also in his *Teutonic Mythology*, compares Heimdal to the Vedic fire deity Agni, noting the identity of 18 of their attributes, having previously noted the links between Heimdal and the idea of fertility. In the Nordic tradition, Heimdal, as Scef, the sheaf of the first harvest, comes to Scandinavia across the sea and teaches the people the secrets of agriculture.

There are also links between Heimdal and the creation of man, part of a story cycle that appears to stretch back to ancient Sumeria. The Sumerians first postulated the creation of men from mud. In Egypt, this idea became expressed in the story of the god Khnum, who created men from the clay of the Nile, and who was generally depicted as a ram. These stories resemble that of the Greek Prometheus, who creates two types of men, one from the mud, and one from divine essence. Heimdal, whose name means “at home in the dale,” is a kenning for the ram, and Heimdal is said to have created the castes of man

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

when he mated with their progenitors.

Thus there is a broad linkage of the roles of Heimdal, as fire god, fertility god, and progenitor of man, with figures in the Egyptian divine cycles.

THE SMITHS VOLUND AND PTAH

In the philosophy of Memphis in Egypt the god Ptah is the divine smith and creator who “speaks” the world into being. The Indo-European tradition knows of a divine smith – Mimir in the northern world, Yima and Yama in the Vedic and Iranian worlds – who created the world, and who was assisted in this creation by another set of smiths who later warred against the gods. The story of the rebellion of the smiths appears in Indo-European myth as early as the first part of the second millennium B.C., and it is a defining trait of Indo-European religion. Ptah’s role as, first, a god of creators and artisans, second, later, as a god of metal-workers, and his eventual equation with Hephaestus by the Greeks, indicates he plays a role in Egypt similar to that of the Indo-European smith god.

In the Hittite literature of the Old Kingdom period – before the Indo-Iranian influences mediated by the Hurrians could appear – the story of the withdrawal of the son of the storm god from the world is known. In this tale, when the son of the storm god withdraws from the world, the world is cast into winter, all fertility departs, no pregnant woman can give birth, and no plant will grow from the ground. Eventually, the son of the storm god is sought out and reconciled.

In the Vedic tradition, this appears as the myth of the Ribhus, who, similarly, have a dispute with the gods and withdraw from the world, taking with them fertility, until the gods seek them out and reconcile.

In the Nordic tradition, as Viktor Rydberg has shown, the smiths grow angry at the gods after their contributions are judged to be inferior to the contributions of Sindre and Brok, their rivals. They withdraw from the world, and systematically kidnap each of the goddesses of fertility, particularly Idunn

THE TRADITION OF THE MOTHER

and Freyja, until nothing can grow in the world and the gods themselves begin to age. Winter expands and threatens to consume the world, and only a massive battle drives it back, allowing the smiths to be imprisoned.⁵³⁰

In the Nordic myth, the smith Mimir guards a grove near his well at one of the roots of the life tree Yggdrasil. The idea of the grove and the well are known in Egypt. In the creation story known in the Pyramid Texts, and in later works, one of the acts of creation by Amun is the mating with “his hand,” which was understood metaphorically as an act of masturbation. “The hand of Amun” became the mother-goddess Iusaas, who was associated with the idea of the tree of life, as similar Near Eastern mother goddesses, such as Isis-Ishtar, were in later Mesopotamian myth. This tree of life was further associated with the centrality of the well, and parallels can be drawn between the figures of Iusaas and that of the Nordic Urd, and the general Indo-European idea of the queen of the Fates. This tree of Iusaas finds its parallel in the Nordic Yggdrasil.⁵³¹

CONCLUSIONS

These parallels suggest a linkage between Egyptian and Nordic myth. The likely sources of this link were the city states of Etruria, whose Semitic merchant colonies traded with the far north and middle-manned northern goods into the Mediterranean – and Mediterranean religious ideas into the far north. This influence explains some of the peculiarities of the Nordic and Germanic religious form, which integrates Near Eastern and Classical motifs, but in a manner that suggests some antiquity to the syncretization.

⁵³⁰Though during their imprisonment one smith, Volund, forges the “sword of victory,” which allows him to receive vengeance, as it is eventually used to destroy the world.

⁵³¹Though as I argue above, Amun is not comparable to Mimir, but is involved in the cycle of myths of the Great Mother which feature the idea of the serpent guardian of the well. This also links Amun to the Hebrew god Yahweh, who creates the tree and sets it at the center of the garden.