

From Fairytale To Goddess

Frau Holle And The Scholars That Try To Reveal
Her Origins

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Introduction

It starts with a girl, a good industrious girl, that anyone would be proud to call their child, and the loss of her mother. Her father, as was the custom of their time, remarries and the step-mother and her daughter come to live with the girl and her father. Unlike the girl, her step-sister is wicked and lazy. Soon, the girl literally becomes a slave in her own home. Injustice prevails and yet the girl remains good. One day, while sitting at the well spinning, the girl accidentally pricks her finger and drops her spindle into the dark depths of the well. She plunges into the well more terrified of her stepmother's reaction than what may happen to her. In the dark watery depths of the well she finds, not death, but the realm of Mother Holle.

In the rest of the tale, which can be found in a copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales under the title 'Mother Holle', 'Mother Holle' rewards the good, hard-working girl by showering her with gold and the wicked, lazy step-sister, by showering her with pitch. This tale is almost certainly the most well known tale about 'Mother Holle', but as far as the being 'Mother Holle' herself goes, it is merely scratching the surface.

Largely undiscovered by the English-speaking world, lies a large corpus of fairytales, folk tales, local mythologies, customs, taboos and physical locations linked to her; especially in the regions of Hessen and Thuringen. But who is she, and why would she be of interest to scholars of Germanic Paganism?

The first scholar to fully describe Frau Holle was Jacob Grimm in his seminal work 'Teutonic Mythology', which furnished us with the following description of what might be considered her basic characteristics:

“In popular legends and nursery-tales, frau Holda (Hulda, Holle, Hulle, frau Holl) appears as a superior being, who manifests a kind and helpful disposition towards men, and is never cross except when she notices disorder in household affairs. None of the German races appear to have cherished these oral traditions so extensively as the Hessians and Thuringians (that Worms bishop was a native of Hesse). At the same time, dame Holle is found as far as the Voigtland, past the Rhön mts in northern Franconia, in the Wetterau up to the Westerwald, and from Thuringia she crosses the frontier of Lower Saxony. Swabia, Switzerland, Bavaria, Austria, North Saxony and Friesland do not know her by that name.

From what traditions has still preserved for us, we gather the following characteristics. Frau Holle is represented as a being of the sky, begirdling the earth: when it snows, she is making her bed, and the feathers of it fly. She stirs up snow, as Donar does rain: the Greeks ascribe the production of snow and rain to their Zeus: Dioj omboj, Il. 5, 91. 11, 493 as well as nifadej Dioj, Il. 19, 357; so that Holda comes before us a goddess of no mean rank. The comparison of snowflakes to feathers is very old; the Scythians pronounced the regions north of them inaccessible, because they were filled with feathers (Herod. 4, 7. conf. 31). Holda then must be able to move through the air, like dame Herke.

She loves to haunt the lake and fountain; at the hour of noon she may be seen, a fair white lady, bathing in the flood and disappearing; a trait in which she resembles Nerthus. Mortals, to reach her dwelling, pass through the well; conf. the name wazzerholde. Another point of resemblance is, that she drives about in a waggon. She has a linchpin put in it by a peasant whom she met; when he picked up the chips, they were gold. Her

annual progress, which like those of Herke and Berhta, is made to fall between Christmas and Twelfth-day, when the supernatural has sway, and wild beasts like the wolf are not mentioned by their names, brings fertility to the land. Not otherwise does 'Derk with the boar,' that Freyr of the Netherlands (p. 214), appear to go his rounds and look after the ploughs. At the same time Holda, like Wuotan, can also ride on the winds, clothed in terror, and she, like the god, belongs to the 'wutende heer.'"¹

However the real interest for the scholar lies in his entry about 'Perchta', which, after making the argument that Holda/Holle and Perchta are the same being, Grimm then went onto theorise that:

"If, independently of the christian calendar, there was a Holda, then neither can Perahta be purely a product of it; on the contrary, both of these adjective names lead up to a heathen deity, who made her peregrination at that very season of yule, and whom therefore the christians readily connected with the sacredness of Christmas and New-year."²

Needless to say, the idea of a Heathen goddess surviving through centuries of Christianity as a folkloric figure that is still widely known to this day is very compelling. It is easy to see why scholars would be interested in trying to discover the true provenance of such a figure, and that is where the focus of this paper will lie – with the scholars. It is not the aim of this paper to try and prove either way whether the folkloric being known as (among other names) Frau Holle, is the survival of a heathen goddess, and the caveat must be given that it was simply impossible to fully cover all of the sources and topics in this work. This paper would be better described an overview of the main scholarly theories surrounding her, but that also includes some discussion of Frau Holle's link to water, and potential interpretations of the Fürstenberg bracteates.

Grimm and Timm

When Jacob Grimm theorized the ancient provenance of the German folkloric personage, Frau Holle and her counterpart (whom he potentially considered to be the same)³ Frau Percht, his theories opened up much debate, both among his contemporaries and modern scholars. Naturally, a plethora of theories and counter-theories sprang up, all with the distinction of being very different from each other.

For example, Wilhelm Müller believed Grimm's parallels between Holle and the continental Germanic goddess Frija to be false, and that out of all the various beings inhabiting the German folkloric landscape, only Frau Freke could be considered to have any connection with the Germanic goddess Frija.⁴⁵ Another scholar by the name of Wilhelm Mannhardt considered Holle to be nothing more than a trend in low mythology rather than a being linked to the world of the gods, and he emphatically denied Grimm's theories about the godhood of Percht.⁶ For Wolfgang Golther and Edgar A List (writing sixty-six years

¹ Grimm, Jacob, and James Steven Stallybrass. *Teutonic Mythology*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1882. 267-68.

² Grimm, 282.

³ Grimm, 272.

⁴ Grimm, 302-304.

⁵ Timm, Erika, and Gustav Adolf Beckmann. *Frau Holle, Frau Percht Und Verwandte Gestalten: 160 Jahre Nach Jacob Grimm Aus Germanischer Sicht Betrachtet*. Stuttgart: Hinzl, 2003.11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

apart from each other), Holle was the Virgin Mary.⁷ Eugen Mogk stated that Holle and Percht were merely retroactively created leaders for the 'Geisterscharen' (ghostly hosts) known as 'Holden' and 'Perchten'.⁸ Viktor Waschnitius posited that Holle was a kind of 'vegetation demon', and Percht a 'death demon'⁹ and on a similar theme of devils and demons, Karl Meisen claimed Holle to be a manifestation of the devil!¹⁰

So where does Holle have her origins? As the Virgin Mary? Merely as a trend in low mythology? A retroactively created leader for a ghostly hoard? Or was she as Grimm suggested, an ancient Germanic goddess? That Grimm's critics were varied goes without saying, but just how did they arrive at the conclusions they did? Moreover, what of the validity of Grimm's theories?

Scholarship is an ever-changing beast and what was considered probable or even correct twenty years ago, might not be now due to factors such as new archaeological discoveries, new academic disciplines or newly developed linguistic techniques. Looking at works of older scholarship such as *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* from DeVries or anything produced by Viktor Waschnitius, one has to wonder how they would fare were they subjected to a detailed study by a modern scholar utilizing more modern methods. For those of us that are curious about Frau Holle, Grimm's theories regarding her (and her counterparts) have already been the subject of such a detailed study, and it is this study, its conclusions, and how they relate back to Grimm's original theories, which we will now examine.

In 2003, a professor of Yiddish studies in the German studies department of the University of Trier by the name of Erika Timm, published her book *'Frau Holle, Frau Percht und verwandte Gestalten'*. The book, a multi-disciplinary study of Grimm's theories regarding Frau Holle, Percht and related beings such as Frau Gode, Herke, Stampe, Freke etc. is an extremely well-written and concise examination; not only of Grimm's theories, but of every extant piece of evidence pertaining to the subject matter, and its social and historical context. Unfortunately, the information presented in this paper is a very summarized version of Erika Timm's arguments, Dr. Timm is a very thorough scholar, and the full extent of her arguments are at times so complex or technical as to merit papers of their own.

For the most part, regardless of her different methods and sources, Timm's findings support Grimm's theories. When it came to his critics, Timm asked if it was possible to have such differing theories of origin if all of the scholars were looking at the same sources.¹¹ As she later reveals though, none of Grimm's detractors had access to all of the texts, and indeed one of them had access to none!

The first source that Timm tackles in her book is that of the 'Mother Holle' tale that was recounted at the beginning of this paper and its value as a source in the study of Frau Holle. This was important for Timm to tackle, as outside of Germany relatively few people are familiar with the personage of Frau Holle, and the majority of those that are, generally only know of her through the tale, (or as it is known by folklorists 'KHM 24'.¹² Unfortunately, Timm concludes that the tale has no academic value, that it's not the 'King's road' of sources that would lead us to any kind of an easy answer regarding Frau Holle, and that in all likelihood was merely the German version of an archetypical fairytale that originated in the Middle East.¹³

⁷ List, Edgar A. "Is Frau Holda The Virgin Mary?". *The German Quarterly* 29. No. 2 (March, 1956).

⁸ Timm, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Timm, 13.

¹² Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. *Kinder- Und Hausmärchen*. Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812. No. 24.

¹³ Timm, 7.

For Grimm, Frau Holle and Bercht/Percht were of ancient provenance, a heathen period goddess that survived in German folklore and tradition, their names sometimes substituted for Diana¹⁴, or their roles even outright supplanted by Mary.¹⁵ The approach Timm takes is far more systematic than that of Grimm, whose work at times can read like a very passionately written jumble of information. In contrast, Timm's work is ordered to an extent that spoils the reader, from the first chapters examining the sources pertaining to Holle et al., to the chapters examining the different geographical areas linked to each of the parallel beings and finally chapters discussing the question of godhood.

In terms of sources, not including the account of Burchard of Worms, there are eleven sources that can be considered to refer to Frau Holle, and the earliest mentions of Holle can be attested to the 13th century, with possible attestation in the 11th. Earlier evidence for Perchta is slightly stronger, due to a greater incidence of scribal culture in the geographical area associated with Perchta/Berchta, and earliest mentions trace back to the 12th century, also with a possibility of attestation in the 11th century.¹⁶ As for the parallel beings of Herke, Freke, Wode and Gode, the sources are a little later than that for Holle or Percht.¹⁷

Geographically speaking, the incidence of the numena in question can be tidily delineated in terms of Upper (Southern), Middle, and Lower (Northern) Germany. Frau Perchta/Berchta belongs to Upper Germany, Frau Holle to Middle Germany and Frau Herke/Freke/Gode/Wode to Lower Germany. From the inclusion of a map that came with Timm's book that marks out all the incidences of lore/tradition/evidence of belief in each being, in each region, the Upper/Middle/Lower delineation is very clear cut. While there are the odd pockets of differing belief in each area (e.g incidences of Herke in the Holle region), Timm concludes that these are the result of factors such as dialectal differences or populations movements. Unfortunately, the various beings of Lower Germany are a little more complex for the scholar to unravel, on the one hand, the documentation of beings like 'Frau Gode'/'Herke'/'Wode'/'Frick'/'Freke', only really began to appear after what she calls the "Germanisation" of those areas.¹⁸ However, on the other hand, there is also the question of the account of the 'Vergōdendēl' ('Frau Godes Portion') ritual that allegedly took place in several places in Lower Germany¹⁹ that may provide further clues to an earlier provenance of these beings.

The 'Vergōdendēl' ritual centres around the harvest and the felling of the final sheaf of rye, which is decorated. When the rest of the work is done, the workers all gather around the final, decorated sheaf, take hold of the ears of rye and shout the following three times:

*"Friggōu, Friggōu, Friggōu! Dütt Jahr up'r Kare, t andre up'n Wagen! ,
(Friggōu, Friggōu, Friggōu! This year on the wheelbarrow, the other up on the wagon!"*
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The Vergōdendēl has definite parallels with the harvest practices recorded by Grimm from Lower Saxony in which it was normal to leave an ear of corn standing in a field "to Woden, for his horse"²¹, or the account from Schaumburg of a field offering of drink to the cries of "Wōld, Wōld, Wōld!"²²

¹⁴ Grimm, Jacob, and James Steven Stallybrass. Teutonic Mythology. London: George Bell and Sons, 1882. 286..

¹⁵ Grimm, 303

¹⁶ Timm, 38.

¹⁷ Timm, 58. Frau Herke can be attested to with certainty until around 1400, and Freke, Wode and Gode until the Middle Ages.

¹⁸ Timm, 199.

¹⁹ Timm, 75.

²⁰ Timm, 191.

²¹ Grimm, 154.

²² Grimm, 156.

The interchangeability of some of the female numena and Wodan in various roles or rituals is discussed quite extensively by Timm, and as she points out, Wodan is well documented in the Lower German area in the form of bracteates, and records concerning tribes linked to Wodan by contemporary accounts.²³ Etymologically, Wode/Gode and Wodan are the same²⁴, as there was a period when the letters ‘G’ and ‘W’ were used interchangeably.²⁵ It was common practice from the late 1400s onwards for women to be known by their husband’s first name²⁶, making names like ‘Frau Gode/Wode’ simply ways of saying ‘Mrs Wodan’, and is therefore suggestive of belief in a marriage between the two. Frau Herke also falls into this category, as the word Herke is believed by Timm to have its origins in the Wild Hunt, or as Orderic Vitalis wrote in 1091: "*La familia Herlechini*". The word Herlechini, was most likely a corruption of the Old English '*Her(e)la Cyning*', or '*King Herla*'. The further speculated connection here being that Her(e)la is not only believed to link to the tribal name '*Hari*', but deriving from the Indo-Germanic word **χariaz*, meaning ‘host leader’²⁷, and accordingly referring to Wodan. This would place Frau Herke in the same category as Frau Gode/Wode, as being names that appear to have come from the custom of married women being known by their husband’s first name. However in the case of Herke, not only does she potentially take Wodan’s name, but in some places she’s also believed to take his role as leader of the Wild Hunt.

As the Scandinavian Odin has a wife in the form of Frigga, so Paulus Diaconus tells us in the '*Historia Langobardorum* (Book 1:8) that Wodan/Godan’s consort is ‘Frea’, according to Grimm:

*“This Langob. Frea accords with the OHG Fria, I take it not only identical with Frigg, but the original form of the name.”*²⁸

But is Frau Gode/Wode/Herke a survival form of the forerunner of the Nordic Frigga or something else? One of the numena from Lower Germany that Timm addresses but has not been discussed yet in this paper is that of ‘Die Frick’, who Timm believes, with her relatively simple etymology leading back to Frija²⁹, to be a ‘survival form’ of the goddess Frija. According to Timm, this Frija is not like the Frigga or Freyja of Scandinavian tradition in terms of function, but more of a ‘Great Goddess’ like the Nerthus of Tacitus’s Germania.³⁰

The idea of a ‘Great Goddess’, in any capacity, has been somewhat sullied in Heathen circles due to the prominence of the ubiquitous Wiccan ‘the Goddess’. However, as Timm points out, the general character of pre-Roman Iron age archeological finds in Northwest Germany do show a fertility cult being prominent, but as time progresses the character of those finds changes, until eventually "the cultus of a war god erases the peaceful farmer cultus".³¹ In conclusion, Timm states that "in the lower German north, the core area of the Saxon tribal state, Wodan usurped the position of a female being in the late heathen

²³ Timm, 195.

²⁴ Timm, 72.

²⁵ Timm, 71.

²⁶ Timm, 213.

²⁷ Timm, 215.

²⁸ Grimm, 301.

²⁹ Timm, 192.

³⁰ Timm, 211.

³¹ Timm, 194.

period".^{32 33}

To turn to Holle and the question of her origins, both Grimm and Timm discuss the account of the 'Diana of Würzburg' found in the *Passio Minor* of the '*Passion of St Kilian*'. The 'Passio' describes a saint's attempts to convert people in the Würzburg area to Christianity, and some of the religious practices that he came up against. One such practice was the worship of the '*Diana of Würzburg*', to which the people were reportedly very attached:

'volumus servire magnae Dianae, sicut et anteriores nostril fecerunt patres, et prosperati sunt in eo usque in praesens'

'We want to serve the great Diana, as our fathers did and in doing so, have prospered well to this day.'³⁴

The *Passio Minor* is potentially quite old, and Timm gives the possible date of writing as sometime between 788 and 800.³⁵ Although the piece was undoubtedly written by a Christian, it's worth remembering that Boniface only founded the diocese of Würzburg in 741/742 and that his diocese only really succeeded in pushing heathen practices out of the limelight,³⁶ at least initially. Therefore it's highly possible that were the piece written in 788, either the author or his parents or grandparents grew up with the pre-Christian ways and beliefs of that region, and given the importance placed on the transmission of information from older members in more traditional societies, it's highly likely the scribe would have heard about those practices first hand.³⁷

But who is the Diana referred to in the *Passio Minor*? Timm rules out a cult to the 'real' Diana, making the point that the worship of the 'real' Diana never reached that region. Regarding the *Passio*, Grimm's conclusion is that the 'Diana' referred to is none other than Frau Holle:

'As it is principally in Thuringia, Franconia and Hessen that Frau Holda survives, it is not incredible that by 'Diana', in the neighbourhood of Würzburg, so far back as the 7th century, was meant none other than she'.

The theory that the Diana of Würzburg is none other than Frau Holle is supported by Timm. In five of the eleven pre-1500 sources that she examines pertaining to Frau Holle, Diana and Holle are equated with each other.³⁸ The phenomenon of substitution of heathen goddess names is also discussed by Grimm in his section on 'Frikka, Frouwa', in the case of Frikka, Mary was often substituted e.g the 'Friggerock' constellation, became known as the 'Mariarok'.³⁹ Not only that, but Grimm reported that many of the qualities attributed to Frigga and Freyja were later attributed to Mary, and this 'Marian substitution' was not limited to Frikka/Frouwa or Frigga, but was also applied to Holle/Holda. In later nursery tales, it is

³² Timm, 199.

³³ The theme of Wodan usurping the position of a female being in the late Heathen period was also discussed by Prof. Terry Gunnell in his presentation "The Goddess(es) In The Marshes" (Aarhus, November 23, 2007).

³⁴ From *Passio Kiliani Minor* as cited in Timm, 208.

³⁵ Timm, 280.

³⁶ Timm, 284.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Timm, 15-17.

³⁹ Grimm, 302.

Mary that sets the girls to spinning and sewing instead of Holle,⁴⁰ and it is Mary that is linked to snow⁴¹ - all functions that Mary does not hold in original Christian tradition. Timm highlights the use of the title 'Queen of Heaven' to refer to both Mary and Holda in the earlier documents⁴², and notes that the use of the title 'Queen of Heaven in conjunction with Mary can be traced to the 6th century. In the end though, not only does Timm support Grimm's assertion that the Diana of Würzburg is Holle, but that Holle is a 'by-name' for Frija and that Frija was the deity whose worship was depicted at Würzburg in the *Passio Minor*.⁴³

The final area of focus and only real area of disagreement with Grimm's theories for Timm is that of Perchta/Berchta and her origins. While Perchta does clearly share certain attributes with Holle and the Lower German beings (e.g her link to spinning, the Wild Hunt, connection with winter etc.), there are still areas of differentiation. Unlike the other beings explored in Timm's book, she's linked to roof top offerings⁴⁴, or certain foods, she engages in the yearly punishment of those that do not keep her feasts or taboos⁴⁵, she's linked to iron and her nose is documented as being an "eiserne Nase" (iron nose) in four sources from the 14th and 15th centuries. Moreover, Timm holds that the origins of Perchta's name are potentially Celtic⁴⁶, possibly coming from Brixta, a Celtic goddess linked to healing wells that was recorded almost a thousand years before the first documentation of Perchta.⁴⁷ So while Berchta/Perchta is often equated with Holle and the Lower German beings, for Timm, she is the product of Celtic origins that shares traits with more eastern beings such as Baba Yaga.

Motz's New Approach To Nerthus

Described posthumously by Rudolf Simek in the tribute volume 'Mythological Women'⁴⁸ as a person that was "never afraid to attack the icons of scholarship if she believed the truth to be elsewhere.", Lotte Motz was, in a lot of ways, a trailblazer when it came to scholarship regarding Frau Holle.

The key questions addressed by Motz's paper 'The Goddess Nerthus: A New Approach'⁴⁹ is that of the similarities between the Frau Holle of German folklore and the Nerthus of Tacitus's account; if Holle is indeed the survival of a heathen goddess; and if her origins are to be found in Tacitus' Germanic 'Terra Mater'. While Motz certainly isn't the first scholar to pose these questions (the first arguably being Grimm), her approach is noteworthy among her peers in that she was largely uninterested in the name of the goddess with whom she was trying to compare Frau Holle.

The name Nerthus is problematic for two main reasons, the first being that 'Nerthus' is a masculine name that is etymologically linked to the Nordic Njörðr. Unsurprisingly, this has led to all kinds of debate about everything from gender swapping deities to disappearing feminine 'u' stem nouns. Secondly, 'Nerthus' is only one of several forms of the goddess name given in the manuscripts, with 'Necthum',

⁴⁰ Grimm, 303.

⁴¹ Grimm, 268.

⁴² Timm, 23.

⁴³ Timm, 304.

⁴⁴ Timm, 301.

⁴⁵ Timm, 311.

⁴⁶ Timm, 317.

⁴⁷ Timm, 318.

⁴⁸ Lotte Motz, Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann. *Mythological Women: Studies In Memory Of Lotte Motz, 1922 - 1997*. Wien: Fassbänder, 2002. 10.

⁴⁹ Motz, Lotte. *The Goddess Nerthus: A New Approach*. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 36, 1992.

'Neithum', 'Herthum', 'Neherthum', 'Verthum' also given.⁵⁰ Addressing those points in turn, Motz notes that while there is only one mention of a 'Nerthus' (in Tacitus's Germania) and plenty of toponyms and mentions of a Njǫrðr in Scandinavia, there is however, no trace whatsoever in Old German or Old English writings, toponyms, or names of either. To put it simply, Motz did not consider there to be enough (or indeed any) representation of either the names 'Nerthus', or its correspondence 'Njǫrðr' on the continent to suggest worship of that being. If anything, 'Nerthus' seems to have only been chosen by Grimm because of the etymological correspondence with 'Njǫrðr.' For Motz, there simply was not enough evidence to consider Nerthus an accurate name for Tacitus's Terra Mater:

I suggest that the name of the goddess, like that of Tamfana, Baduhenna, and the Alci, cannot be equated with that of a known deity of north-Germanic religion.⁵¹

After dispensing with the name 'Nerthus', the next clue for Motz was Tacitus's use of the title '*Terra Mater*' in conjunction with the goddess whose rites he was describing. For the Roman Tacitus, the term 'Terra Mater' had a very specific meaning, one that was very different from what modern people would think of when considering the term 'Earth Mother'. Through examination of the cultic practices and names given to Roman goddesses (namely Ceres and Tellus) connected to fecundity, surprisingly there is no usage whatsoever of the title 'Terra Mater'. Indeed, it seems to have only been applied to goddesses of foreign, or non-Roman origin (e.g Demeter), and when addressing goddesses when cursing; such as in the curse recorded by Suetonius that invoked the infernal gods to only grant the deceased Tiberius a position among the impious dead. Because of this, Motz concludes that the use of the term 'Terra' only refers to the earth in a chthonic rather than agricultural sense.⁵²

The '*Terra Mater*' of Tacitus's account had certain characteristics, for example; her arrival brings peace; she carries joy and gladness to the places she visits; she dwells in a distant secret forest, but travels in the world at her pleasure; she is invisible; she actively interferes in the affairs of men; and it's forbidden to behold her. Motz considered it rare for a deity to take such an active interest in the lives of mortals, not only rare, but characteristic, and indicative of a link between the '*Terra Mater*' and a well-known German numen:

That a godhead visits humans and intervenes in their concerns is indeed a rare and characteristic phenomenon. Just such a divinity is encountered, even in modern times, in the regions of German speech. Folk traditions have preserved the features of this female deity so that, with minor variations, she emerges as a well defined and vivid creature. Though she belongs to widely separated geographic areas and is designated by many names we cannot doubt that the many individual spirits had arisen from one basic form.⁵³

There are many regional names for the "*many individual spirits*" that Motz mentions, but her work is

⁵⁰ Motz, 3.

⁵¹ Motz, 4.

⁵² Motz, 5-11.

⁵³ Motz, 11.

mostly focused on Frau Holle, Frau Perchta, and in northern Germany, Frau Harke and Frau Gode.⁵⁴ As her 1984 paper ‘The Winter Goddess: Percht, Holda, and Related Figures’⁵⁵ also demonstrated, there are number of documents that prove Frau Holle’s continued importance into the Christian period, such as Martin Luther’s sermons raging against Holle and her ‘tremendous’ nose (potznasn)⁵⁶, Lanzkranna’s reference to ‘frawen bercht’ or ‘frawen holt’ as ‘the heathen goddess’⁵⁷, and the prevalence of sites⁵⁸ and festive days linked to her name.⁵⁹ Motz then turns to examples taken from folklore and tradition to provide the evidence for similarities between the attributes discerned from the Tacitus account of Nerthus and those of Holle.⁶⁰ The distant, remote dwelling, the wain transportation, the interference in the lives of humans, bathing, and taboos against seeing her face are all mirrored in folklore about Frau Holle and related figures⁶¹. The only area in which there is absolutely no parallel between Holle and Nerthus, is that of human sacrifice. Unlike the Nerthus of the Tacitus account, there are no folkloric accounts that link Holle to human sacrifice in a concrete way.⁶²

However it is perhaps worth mentioning here, that outside of Motz’s paper, there is some debate about a possible link to human sacrifice in a story connected to ‘Die Blanke Helle’, a pond in Berlin’s Alboinplatz.⁶³ According to local folklore, ‘Die Blanke Helle’ is reputedly connected to the goddess Hel and was a cultic site at which her priest would offer sacrifice to the waters (under which she was believed to have had her domain) in exchange for a good harvest. The controversy lies with the fact that there are no mentions of Hel outside of Scandinavia, the lack of parallels with other accounts of Hel (i.e there are no mentions of Hel as a goddess concerned with fertility), and the strong parallels with the Tacitus Nerthus account and folklore about Frau Holle.

Despite Tacitus’s mention of the Anglii as being one of the tribes that worship Nerthus, Motz did not believe that worship to have survived migration to the British Isles, although she does concede that the numen was represented to some extent in Scandinavia, but doesn’t elaborate further on this.⁶⁴ In her final paragraph, she draws attention to the 6th century Oberwarschen bracteate depicting a woman holding items that resemble a distaff and spindle, and while she doesn’t explicitly say it, the parallel she is drawing between the numen/a of folklore known for her/their link to spinning, and this ‘Mistress of the Spindle’ depicted on the bracteates couldn’t be clearer: This ‘Mistress of the Spindle, who travels from afar to intervene in the affairs of men’ survives to this day in the form of ‘Percht, Holda, and Related Figures’.⁶⁵

⁵⁴ Motz, 12.

⁵⁵ Motz, Lotte. The Winter Goddess: Percht, Holda, And Related Figures. *Folklore* vol. 95:ii (1984). 151 -166.

⁵⁶ Motz, 151.

⁵⁷ Motz, Lotte. The Goddess Nerthus: A New Approach. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 36 (1992).12.

⁵⁸ Motz, Lotte. The Winter Goddess: Percht, Holda, And Related Figures. *Folklore* vol. 95:ii (1984). 155-156.

⁵⁹ Motz, 152-153.

⁶⁰ Motz, Lotte. The Goddess Nerthus: A New Approach. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 36 (1992).16.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Die Blanke Helle. *Körper, Geist, Seele/Berlin*. August 2007.

⁶⁴ Motz, 17.

⁶⁵ Motz,17.

Queen of Heaven

Perhaps the strangest departure from Grimm's original theory came in 1895 from a scholar by the name of Wolfgang Golther who, in his *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie*⁶⁶, theorised that Frau Holle/Holda were in fact no continuation of a heathen goddess, but the Virgin Mary.

Golther's theory might seem a little irrelevant in a paper written for a heathen audience that seeks to examine scholarly work based on the premise that Holle is the survival of an ancient heathen goddess. However, Golther wasn't the only scholar to suggest an origin theory that involved the Virgin Mary. Sixty-one years after the *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie*, a scholar from the State University of Iowa, Edgar A List, also made the case.⁶⁷ Golther's original theory was predominantly based on contemporary scholarship that either outright dismissed, invalidated, or was simply unaware of the earliest mentions of Frau Holle/Holda; instead focusing primarily on perceived similarities between folktales about Holda and those of Mary. Where Grimm saw those similarities as being the result of Holle being replaced in some tales and functions by Mary, Golther saw Holda as being a later development that hadn't existed prior to 1500.

List's work was largely a re-visitation of Golther's, but with the added consideration of text that was yet undiscovered at the time of Golther's book. Believed to have been written between 1236 and 1250, the text, a dictionary of superstitions (*Aberglaubensverzeichnis*) was compiled by Rudolf, a Cistercian monk and contained the following passage:

'In nocte nativitatis Christi ponunt regine celi, quam dominam Holdam vulgus appellat, ut eas ipsa adiuvet'

(In the night of Christ's nativity, they set the table for the Queen of Heaven, whom the people call Frau Holda, so that she might help them.)'

For List, although 'Frau Holda' is clearly named in the passage, the use of the title 'Queen of Heaven' was more indicative of a reference to the Virgin Mary:

'There should be no question that the author, a cleric, had in mind the Virgin Mary when using the term "regene celi". She is referred to as such in the opening words of the Easter anthem "regine celi laetere", which goes back to at least the twelfth century.'

Two additional pieces of evidence given were the Latin translation of Martin Luther's comments about 'Fraw Hulde' in his 1522 *The Exposition of the Epistles at Basel* and a 1550 Aesopian fable by Erasmus Alberus.

For those that study Holle, Martin Luther's comments about 'Fraw Hulde' are already well-known:

⁶⁶ Golther, Wolfgang. *Handbuch Der Deutschen Mythologie*. Leipzig, 1895. 489-500.

⁶⁷ List, Edgar A. "Is Frau Holda The Virgin Mary?". *The German Quarterly* 29. No. 2 (March, 1956).

*"Hie tritt fraw hulde erfur mit der potznasen, die natur, und thar yhrem gott wider-
pellen"*

*(Here cometh up Dame Hulde with the snout, to wit, nature, and goeth about to gainstay
her God)*

What is not as well known though, is Martin Bucer's translation of this passage into Latin that renders 'fraw hulde' as 'verenda nostra hera', or 'Our Venerated Lady'. While it may appear incongruent of Martin Luther to use such a description for something he considered divine in other texts, List makes the argument that this needed be the case as the Mary-Holda association disappeared by the sixteenth century and that we are merely seeing 'residuum' of that 'onetime association' in Bucer's translation and Alberus' fable.

However, if the seeming incongruence of Martin Luther's words in Bucer's translation and List's explanation are hard to consolidate, then the example of Alberus' fable is perhaps even more tenuous for the already skeptical. In his tale, Alberus describes the deployment of a band of female beings coming to kill a purported monster (a mouse):

*'Es kamen auch in diesem Heer,
Viel Weiber, die sich forchten sehr
Vnd trugen sicheln in der Handt
Fraw Holda hatt sie aussgesandt*

*(Also in this host came many women
who were very frightened
and carried sickles in hand
Frau Holda had sent them forth)'*

The 1550 version of this tale is not the original and in the original version, dating from 1534, the name 'Fraw Holda' is rendered 'Vns liebe frawe', a title that List points out, was exclusively given to the Virgin Mary which translates (although not directly) into English as 'Our Lady'.

Water As An Entrance To The Sacred

The theme of the desperate and mistreated girl diving into the well to retrieve her spindle rather than dealing with the wrath of her stepmother, and then coming across an otherworldly kingdom, is undoubtedly one that grips the imagination; and the idea that one could be transported to another world through the medium of water has been fodder for literary authors and film makers alike. At the beginning

of this paper, we looked at the 'Mother Holle' fairy tale as a source, and although it is not the 'King's Road' of sources that it was initially hoped to be, the water aspect of this tale may be worth further exploration.

From the Tacitus account that told of the goddess residing on a holy island⁶⁸, to Procopius's accounts of the people of the Low Countries ferrying the souls of their dead to an island off the coast⁶⁹, to ship burial finds; The theme of water as a gateway to the otherworld/underworld seems to be "more or less universal."⁷⁰

In terms of studying Frau Holle, the watery aspect is one that is well worth studying, especially given her theorized origins in the goddess of Tacitus's account who dwelled on a holy island, and her more modern lore that has her connected to bodies of water, or watery places that are 'liminal' in some way, such as the Hilgershäuser Höhle⁷¹ cave pool in Hessen that is a meeting of earth and water. We also have plenty of evidence for worship at bodies of water, with bog bodies, votive offerings and what may have been god posts having been found at various water-connected sites in Northern Europe. Regarding these offerings, a distinction can be drawn between the types of water body and types of offerings made. In simple terms, objects more traditionally associated with men (e.g weapons) are more often found in open water such as streams, rivers and lakes, whereas objects more traditionally associated with women (e.g jewelry and clothes) are mainly found in marshes and bogs.⁷²

While worship at bodies of water has been documented in later periods (e.g in Knut's legal edicts forbidding these practices)⁷³, this wild watery worship was more of a feature of worship pre-500AD (Fabech argues 600AD in her book '*Centrality in Old Norse Mental Landscapes*'), after which point, worship seems to predominantly move firmly into the civilization of the hall. It is also possible to discern a difference in the nature of idols worshipped from the existing evidence. Earlier finds, such as the idols recovered from the bogs of Foerlev Nymolle and Rebild Skovhuse have much less distinct features than the later pillar gods.⁷⁴ Unfortunately we have no way of knowing who those early idols represented, however we do know that there were goddesses linked to water. The most immediate examples (aside from 'Nerthus') being Frigga (whose abode is in the 'fen halls' of 'Fensalir'), and Saga (said to dwell in the 'sunken bank' of 'Sökkvabekkr'). More controversial, but no less interesting is the theory that Grendel's mother from the Old English epic 'Beowulf' is a remembering of sorts, of these watery goddesses that were worshipped in the wild places, away from the civilized light of man's society and halls. Proponents of this theory point to the, at times, contradictory terms used to refer to her in the epic, such as '*Brimwylf*' ('Wolf of the Lake'), '*Grundwyrgen*' ('Monster of the Deep'), '*Grundhyrd*' ('Guardian of the Depths'), and '*Ides*' ('Lady of High Standing'). One cannot help but note that the '*Ides*' applied to Grendel's mother is almost the same word as '*Idisi*' found in the second Merseburg charm.⁷⁵

The changes wrought during the Migration Period were deep and socially difficult. Not only were people

⁶⁸ Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania*, transl. by H. Mattingly, revised by S.A. Handford (London: Penguin, 1970)

⁶⁹ Eldar Heide, "Holy Islands And The Otherworld: Places Beyond Water", in *Isolated Islands In Medieval Nature, Culture and Mind*, ed. Gerhard Jaritz and Torstein Jørgensen (Budapest/Bergen: 2011). 57-80.

⁷⁰ Heide, 58.

⁷¹ GardenStone. Götting Holle: Auf Der Suche Nach Einer Alten Götting. Usingen: Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt (2002-2006). 28-29.

⁷² Gunnell, Terry. "The Goddess(es) in the Marshes: Old Norse Myth." Lecture, International Symposium., University of Aarhus, Aarhus, Denmark, November 22-23, 2007.

⁷³ Griffiths, Bill. *Aspects of Anglo Saxon Magic*. Norfolk: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2003.104.

⁷⁴ Glob, P.V. *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*. Trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. London: Faber and Faber, 1977. 180-185.

⁷⁵ Davidson, Hilda Ellis. *Roles Of The Northern Goddess*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 21-23.

on the move, but were in all likelihood also experiencing major worldview changes in order to adapt from being settled with ways based more in the lands of their ancestors, to being more mobile. Some scholars have also suggested that these changes included a usurping of land-based 'mother' figures by Odin⁷⁶, and while there were goddesses, not only do we have less evidence of their worship⁷⁷ but in terms of function, they pale next to the all-powerful goddess of the Tacitus account. It is interesting to note that not only is Odin toponymically well represented, but that places associated with him in Denmark and Southern Sweden e.g Odenso, Odensjoen etc saw a period of unrest during the Migration Period.⁷⁸

As time went on, the distinction between the civilized world of the hall and men and the wild uncivilized world outside the hall deepened, with the hall considered the epitome of all that was good (and male) in the world and anything outside of the hall 'liminal' and female.⁷⁹ Whereas previously men had looked further afield for that liminality, they now only needed to look outside of their halls to that which was not to be trusted, the domain of the 'roving Seidrworkers', who ironically, according to the Könungsbok manuscript came "*out of the waters under the tree*".

The Spinning Goddess of the Bracteates

The theories put forth by Golther and List with regards to the various folktales and texts are not the extent of the inclusion of Mary in the scholarship surrounding Frau Holle. The same controversy has touched the study of a type of bracteates referred to as the 'Fürstenberg' type, a series of five bracteates which all share the attribute of depicting large-breasted and/or crowned female figures either carrying staffs and/or spindles. Given that the male figures depicted on bracteates are generally accepted as representing deities such as Woden or Thunor, it must then follow that the female figures depicted in the Fürstenberg series represent goddesses. In his paper, 'The Goddess Who Weaves: Some Iconographic Aspects Of Bracteates Of The Fuerstenberg Type'⁸⁰, Michael J Enright not only examines these attributes, but the comparison put forth by Detlev Ellmers in 1974 between the bracteate known as Oberwerschen-B, which is generally interpreted as depicting a woman spinning and a Byzantine disc brooch dating to around the sixth or seventh century depicting Mary.

On the disc brooch, Mary is being visited by an angel bearing a cross staff. She is seated and from her right hand dangles a spindle, her left hand is held up in a gesture of blessing. While foreign to European tradition, the theme of Mary spinning was not an uncommon theme in Byzantine art and was occasionally depicted within a spinning context on contemporary ivory work. Concentrating on the comparison both of activities depicted and style of art used on the Oberwerschen-B bracteate and the Byzantium pieces

⁷⁶ See footnote No. 33.

⁷⁷ Turville-Petre, Gabriel. *Myth And Religion Of The North*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. 189. "Considering her (Frigg) antiquity and exalted position, it is surprising how little evidence there is of her worship. Some have claimed to find her name in place names, for the most part in Sweden. Most of these are of doubtful origin."

⁷⁸ Gunnell 2007.

⁷⁹ Weston, L.M.C. "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms." *Modern Philology* Vol. 92, No. 3 (February 1995).

⁸⁰ Michael J. Enright, "The Goddess Who Weaves: Some Iconographical Aspects Of Bracteates Of The Fürstenberg Type", in *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz, 1922-1997*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann. Wien: Fassbänder, 2002. 54-70.

Ellmers believed to be its counterparts, he further went on to conclude that the bracteates that he had examined were not to be seen as being pagan amulets, but Christian, and as 'substitutes' for pagan amulets.⁸¹

The German bracteate expert Karl Hauck hotly refuted this view, arguing that the spindle and weaving context wasn't enough evidence for substitution and copying, that at the time the Fuerstenberg-type bracteates were produced, the age of syncretism had not yet reached the North and it would therefore be unreasonable to ascribe Christian significance to the bracteates. The interpretation of the staff with a cross-bar on both ends (as seen on some of the bracteates) would also be completely incongruent with Byzantine representations, as to have the cross facing downwards would have been viewed as a mockery, or even sacrilegious by Christians, thus making it highly unlikely that a Christian artisan would have created such a depiction. The way the female figure is depicted in most of the bracteates, as a large breasted woman with almond shaped eyes, a depiction of fertility, also adds to the argument that the woman of the bracteates was not the Mary of Christian tradition, for as Enright points out, this would be wholly incongruous with Christian traditions of chastity surrounding the mother of Jesus.⁸²

With the Virgin Mary out of the picture, the rest of Enright's paper focuses on who the goddess/es of the bracteates could be, and while it would not only be impossible but irresponsible to suggest names for the goddesses depicted, Enright does succeed in discovering something of her/their attributes.

The tools of the bracteate goddess/es are those of the fiber arts, and while there is some dispute as to which necessary skill is the most represented on these bracteates (spinning or weaving). Enright leans to the point of view that weaving is the most represented, that the staff shown on some of the bracteates is a 'weaving beam', such as the one carried as a symbol of office by the seeress Feidelm from the Irish epic '*Táin Bó Cuailnge*' (The Cattle-Raid of Cooley').⁸³ Weaving, as Enright points out, is intrinsically linked with magic in Northern European mythologies, with the account of the Valkyries weaving the fate of battle in the *Darraðarlioð* being one of the best descriptions of this.⁸⁴ If we are to accept Enright's link between the tools depicted with the goddess of the bracteates and seeresses, it is worth bearing in mind that other scholars have found more credible origins for the Seidr staff in the distaff used in spinning.⁸⁵

Regardless of whether spinning or weaving is the most relevant here, the link that Enright makes between the bracteates and seeresses and/or cultic behavior is further supported by find-provenance. While the 'Fürstenberg' series of bracteates may be small, two of the five bracteates discovered can be associated with Pagan cult sites. The Oberwerschen bracteate was found under the chin of an older woman whose grave was near a circular trench. When compared to a number of similar Scandinavian sites that are believed to have served 'cultic purpose', the Oberwerschen site was found to be sufficiently similar to merit the same assessment. The Oberwerschen woman was also buried with a spindle whorl, a

⁸¹ Enright, 58.

⁸² Enright, 58-60.

⁸³ Enright, 66-67.

⁸⁴ Enright, 66.

⁸⁵ Eldar Heide, "Spinning Seiðr", in *Old Norse Religion In Long-Term Perspectives. Origins, Changes, And Interactions*, ed. Anders Andren et. al. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004). 164-170.

silver needle, scissors, a knife and two bronze keys.⁸⁶ The Gudme II bracteate was found in an area believed to have had a high incidence of Pagan cultic activity, Gudme itself meaning ‘home of the gods’.⁸⁷

While Enright’s paper provides a decent overview of the work surrounding the Fürstenberg type bracteates, we know relatively little about the beliefs of Migration age Northern and Western Europeans, making it very difficult to interpret any bracteates correctly, and leaving us largely to draw our own conclusions about the extant evidence; as Lotte Motz did when she wrote:

*“A sixth century bracteate of Oberwerschen in Germany depicts a woman holding a large, spindle-like object in her left hand, while a small form, resembling a distaff, is shown in the background to her right. It is possible to recognize in the image the mighty goddess, Mistress of the Spindle, who travels from afar to intervene in the affairs of men.”*⁸⁸

Conclusion

The question of the provenance of Frau Holle is perhaps much larger than it may initially seem, with many people writing her off as being nothing more than a folkloric figure. However as more than a few scholars have found out over the years, Holle’s story isn’t nearly as simple, nor her mysteries as easy to uncover as one might think. Rather than being an open and shut case, it’s a journey beginning with Grimm and then quite securely back to the 13th century. Things begin to get a little ‘murky’ around the 11th century, but the researcher is still on relatively secure ground. But then there are these tempting links and pieces of evidence to chase down that take the research back further still, and that’s when the hunt becomes almost as dark and uncertain as the fifth century bogs where she may have had her origins.

There are no hard and fast answers here. Like the ‘Mother Holle’ story, this paper isn’t a ‘king’s road’ that will lead the reader to a definitive answer, and it is therefore down to the individual to take from this what he or she wants. Tacitus’s goddess was not to be seen by humans, not if they wanted to live, and so if Frau Holle is the same as that goddess, perhaps it’s fitting that no one yet has managed to fully uncover her origins?

As for myself, there will always be the matter of that cold snowy day at the Frau Holle Teich when I snuck across the frozen water to the base of the statue to lay my offering, and felt what can only be described as *awe* like I had never felt before.

This research is a product of that day in the cold and this paper is the fulfillment of an oath.

⁸⁶ Enright, 65.

⁸⁷ Enright, 64.

⁸⁸ Motz, Lotte. The Goddess Nerthus: A New Approach. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 36 (1992). 17.

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