

NAMES IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL LAY SKÍRNISMÁL

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The Old Icelandic poetry preserved in manuscripts can be divided into the Eddaic and the Skaldic poetry. The Eddaic poems have mostly free alliteration. Most of the Eddaic poetry is preserved in a manuscript now called Elder Edda or Poetic Edda.<sup>1</sup> This manuscript was written in Iceland A.D. 1270. Its poems are several centuries older, mostly of heathen times. These poems may be divided into mythological and heroic poems. The mythological poems contain stories about heathen gods, words of wisdom, and descriptions of the world.

Four deities are known to have been common to the Germanic peoples: Óðinn, Tyr, Þor (O. E. Woden, Tiw, Þunor) and Frigg (O.E. Frig). In the Old Norse they are called Aesir. The one-eyed Óðinn, chief of the gods, is also the most complex. He is master of magic who can restore the dead to life; god of wisdom and rhetoric who has exchanged his eye for a draught of the well of knowledge, stolen from the giants the mead of poetry. From his seat Hliðskjálf, "Gate Tower," he can see into all the worlds.

A second race of gods, the Vanir, were deities of wealth, fertility and peace. Njörðr, associated especially with the harvests of

the sea, dwelling in Nóatún, "Home of Ships," is the male counterpart of the goddess Nerthus, Terra Mater, who was worshiped by tribes along the south Baltic shore (Tacitus, Germania, 40). The ritual of her worship is similar to that of Freyr, son of Njörðr. Freyr, "Lord," or Yngvi (O. E. Ing), divine ancestor of the Ingvaeones, was called "God of the World."

An interesting story of the gods is told in the mythological poem Skírnismál ("Words of Skírnir").<sup>2</sup> Sitting in Hliðskjálf, the throne of Óðinn, the god Freyr gazes into the world of giants, where he sees the giant maiden, Gerðr, whose beauty makes him sick with love. In the world of the giants (toward the north) was a large and stately mansion which Gerðr was going to enter. As she lifted up the latch of the door, so great a radiancy was thrown from her hand that the air and waters, and all the worlds were illuminated by it. At this sight, Freyr, as a just punishment for his audacity in mounting on that sacred throne, was struck with sudden sadness. On his return home he could neither speak, nor sleep, nor drink, nor did any one dare to inquire the cause of his affliction; but Njörðr, at last, sent for Skírnir, the messenger of Freyr, and charged him to demand of his master why he thus refused to speak to any one. Skírnir promised to do this, though with great reluctance, fearing that all that he had to expect was a severe reprimand. Skírnir, however, went to Freyr, and asked him boldly why he was so sad and silent. Freyr answered

that he had seen a maiden of such surpassing beauty that if he could not possess her he should not live much longer, and that this was what rendered him so melancholy. "Go, therefore," Freyr added, "and ask her hand for me, and bring her here whether her father be willing or not, and I will amply reward thee." Skírnir undertook to perform the task, provided he might previously gain possession of Freyr's sword, which was of such an excellent quality that it would of itself strew a field with carnage whenever the owner ordered it. Freyr, impatient of delay, immediately made him a present of the sword, and Skírnir set out on his journey and obtained the maiden's promise that within nine nights she would come to a place called Barey, and there wed Freyr. Skírnir having reported the success of his message, Freyr exclaimed:

Long er nótt,                      langar ro tvaer,  
           hvé um þreyiak þriár?  
 opt mér mánaðr                minni þótti  
           en síá hálf hýnótt! <sup>3</sup>

Long is one night,  
 Long are two nights,  
 But how shall I hold out three?  
 Shorter hath seemed  
 A month to me oft  
 Than the half of this longing-time. <sup>4</sup>

Scholars have seen an ancient fertility myth in this story. According to this theory, Freyr is the god of fertility and sunshine, Skírnir is a ray of sunshine (Old Icelandic skírr, "bright"), and Gerðr (Old Icelandic garðr, "enclosure", "field") is the cornfield held fast in the clutches of the frost giants, demons of winter. The Skírnismál is one of the older of the mythological poems in the Poetic Edda, and probably originated in Norway before Iceland was settled by the Norwegians.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Edda Saemundar," in Codex Regius, MS. No. 2365 quarto in the Old Royal Collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, 1937).

<sup>2</sup>Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1974), pp. 67-74.

<sup>3</sup>Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. Gustav Neckel, p.74.

<sup>4</sup>All translations from the Old Icelandic language have been made by the author of this article.