

The Winter-Nights Feast

The Winter-Nights feast marks the end of the harvest and turning of the year from summer to winter. At this time, those cattle and swine that could not be kept through the winter were slaughtered as part of the harvest-blessing. This was a time for celebration: the harvest-work was over for the year, the cattle brought in from the fields to the barn. Now the awareness of folk turned inward, for now there was time during the long Northern nights to do all the things that might be done within the hall - carving and fixing, spinning the year's crop of flax, knotting nets and shaping shafts for the year to come - and deep thinking largely took the place of the doing of deeds.

Winter-Nights is the feast at which we give worship to our dead forebears, from which two of the Old Norse names for the festival, "álfablót" and "dísablót", stemmed. It can be thought of as the Germanic equivalent to the Celtic Samhain, the end of summer when the dead were remembered and food put out for them. In this respect, Winter-Nights is something like Yule; however, the emphasis at Winter-Nights is largely on the harvest (to which the alfs and idises have lent their aid). As the harvest celebration, Winternights is greeted with much joy; the meeting of the living and the dead, and the remembrance of our fore-gone kin is likewise not a sorrowful, but a joyful thing.

However, the turning from summer to winter, from light to darkness, was keenly felt by our Northern forebears. After Winternights, the Wild Hunt begins its night-riding through the shorn fields; the trolls and ghosts come closer to the dwellings of humans. So, as well as being a feast of joy, there is a certain solemnity to Winternights: it marks the beginning of that time at which the darkness belongs most to the wild wights, which peaks at Yule and ends at Ostara. During this season, Óðin is more to be seen in his elder shape as death-god and leader of the Hunt, and Skaði rules as the etin-born maid of winter.

From the name "Dísablót", and the fact that women seem to have played a special role at this feast (Starkaðr's grandmother Álfhildr making the blessing to the idises and the farm-woman telling Sigvatr to go away because her household was making a blessing to the alfs and feared Óðin's wrath), we may also see that the womanly beings of death and fruitfulness were especially called on in the course of this feast. It was at this time that the dark dísir of Þiðrandi's family took him (see "Idises"). "Ynglingatal" tells of the death of King Aðils, who rode his horse about the idis-hall at the blessing; the horse, by the workings of a "witch-wight", stumbled and Aðils dashed his brains out on the stone floor. Turville-Petre suggests that the "witch-wight" or idis to whom the hall belonged was a single goddess, perhaps Freyja, and that "This goddess, like the dead dísir of the Atlamál, had called the king to join her. If she is not herself dead, she is the goddess of death" (Myth and Religion, p. 226).

One of the most widespread harvest-customs of the Germanic folk is the leaving of the Last Sheaf. Rites for this vary greatly. In some areas, the grain-ghost or grain-wight is thought to dwell in the sheaf, and must be chased and either driven out or carefully captured, bound, and brought home. In Jutland, when the Last Sheaf is bound, folk say, "We have captured the hare"; in Fyn and Zealand, they talk about "catching the fox" or "driving the fox out" (Troelsen, Nordisk Bondereligion, p. 72); de Vries cites a number of like examples ("Contributions to the Study of Othin, Especially in his

Relation to Agricultural Practices in Modern Popular Lore"), such as the Dutch custom of making a hare-effigy out of grass and flowers at the end of harvesting and having the boy who bears it act as the hare and presently suffer capture (p. 15).

Elsewhere, "(the corn-spirit) is regarded as a supernatural being in human shape and it is identified with a real person at the moment of the cutting of the last sheaf. This person may be the laborer who wields the last stroke of the sickle, or the woman who binds the last sheaf, a stranger accidentally passing by, or even the landlord himself" (de Vries, "Contributions to the Study of Othin", p. 17). De Vries cites the Jutlandic practices of making the girl who has bound the last sheaf dance with a hay figure in the shape of a man (made from the last cartload of grain), who is called her husband, or of wedding the girl to "the Old One". This, he suggests, was originally a sacrifice in which the girl was first killed as "the Old One's" bride; then later, perhaps, "tabooed by virtue of her spiritual relation to the corn-demon and consequently treated as a widow" (p. 18). Troelsen mentions that the person who has bound the Last Sheaf is the butt of unmerciful amusement, and that a maiden who has bound it has to bear it home hanging about her neck and dance with it at the harvest festivities (Nordisk Bondereligion, p. 73).

Especially in Sweden and Denmark, the Last Sheaf is supposed to be left out for Oden's horse. The North German Last Sheaf-charm, recorded in 1593 by Nicolaus Gryse as a song sung by the harvesters dancing around the Last Sheaf ("Wodan, give your horse now fodder. This year thistle and thorn - the next year better grain"), was mentioned in "Yule", and the relationship between the Wild Hunt and the fruitfulness of the fields spoken of there. In Germany, the Last Sheaf is also given to a demon called Wode, Wold, or Waul; de Vries originally disputed the connection between Wodan, the Wild Hunt, and the Last Sheaf rites ("Contributions to the Study of Othin", 1931), particularly doubting that Wode/Waudl was the same wight as Wodan, but later came to modify his opinion considerably ("Wodan und die Wilde Jagd", 1968?). Later folk tradition has the Last Sheaf left "for the birds"; it is also mentioned that "In Gellerup...a little bit had to stand unharvested for the birds and the beasts and the nissen. Here the 'Unsjäger' (Óðinn's-Hunter) comes when the corn is harvested" (Troelsen, Nordisk Bondereligion, p. 71). More corrupt (and likely older) forms of the name appear in Germany: in Mecklenburg, the Last Sheaf is food for the horse of "de Waur"; in Gross-Trebow, it is left to stand "for the Wolf, as fodder for his horse". The oldest references to this custom stem from a South German Statsregister (ca. 1350-90), which mentions the leaving of the "Wutfuter" or "Wod's fodder" (Jahn, Deutsche Opfergebräuche, p. 164). In Bavaria, the Last Sheaf is left for the "Waudlhunde" (Little Wod-Dog?), together with beer, milk, and bread; this wight was supposed to come and eat them on the third night. The Waudlhunde may well be seen as one with the black hounds or wolves that follow the Wild Hunt, or perhaps Wodan himself in a wolflike shape. Throughout North Germany, the Last Sheaf itself is called "the Wolf", which Jahn sees as possibly a corruption of the name "Wodan"; it is sometimes made into the shape of a wolf, adorned with blossoms and green twigs where it stands in the fields (pp. 178-79).

In Germany, it was common to bind the Last Sheaf into a "Waul-staff" with bright ribbons and decorate it with flowers; the Sheaf itself could be called "Wode", and may also have been seen at times as the embodiment of the god. The harvesters then danced about the "Wode" in a ring, calling on him with charms such as the Last Sheaf-charm quoted above; Jahn suggests that,

especially in earlier days, each person got a bit of the Sheaf to hang over their door as a holy thing (*Deutsche Opfergebräuche*, p. 170). In Niederporing, the Last Sheaf was made into a large corn-dolly by the men, while the women gathered flowers to decorate him with; he was given the name Åswald (Ase-Ruler - someone who really wanted to could possibly also suggest that this name might have been derived from, or substituted for an earlier *Ansuz-Woðanaz), and they all thanked him for a good harvest without accident. In other parts of Lower Bavaria, the harvesters made a knot (without using the left hand at all) around the three standing stalks of grain, saying "That is for the Åswald" (*Deutsche Opfergebräuche*, p. 175).

A few apples were also left hanging from the fruit harvest for "der Wod" in the area of Raddenfort and Käterhagen; in Pommerania, the last apple or pear was left for the "weather-maiden". Jahn mentions that the bones and various bits of the sacrificial beasts were, like the remains of all Germanic sacrifices, seen as mighty talismans, and often put out in the fields for harvest-luck (p. 230).

Beside the Old Man, the Old Woman (that is, the Earth?) was also worshipped at this time: the Last Sheaf was called the Old Woman in Denmark (de Vries, "Contributions to the Study of Othin", p. 17). In Northumberland, the Last Sheaf was called the "harvest Queen" (Whistler, *The English Festivals*, p. 188). As well as Wode himself, we have "Fru Gode" or "fru Gauen", to whom the Last Sheaf was often left in Northern Germany; Grimm chooses to read the name as a survival of the archaic manly title "Fro" instead of the contemporary womanly "Frau" or "fru", interpreting this deity as "Fro Wode/Wodan" rather than "Frau Wode/Wodan" (*Teutonic Mythology*, pp. 252-53). This is a matter of choice; although since we have womanly leaders of the Wild Hunt as well as sundry manly leaders, and since the Earth is the chief giver of harvest, it seems not unlikely that she (one of Wodan's many brides!) could well have been the receiver of the Last Sheaf. Jahn quotes a German charm: "Wir gebens der Alten, / Sie soll es behalten. Sie sei uns im nächsten Jahr / So gut, wie sie es diesmal war" - We give it to the Old One, / She shall hold it. / Be she to us in the next year / As good, as she was in this (p. 183). Those who wish may change the Last Sheaf/Wodan-gift in this rite to a gift to the Old Woman.

A custom which is just taking hold among true folk in America is the carving of "Winternights pumpkins". These have the same general goal as Halloween pumpkins - that is, to scare away ill ghosts and wights, while offering much enjoyment to the children of the kindred. The "Winternights pumpkins" can also be seen as gifts to the god/esses after the manner of the Last Sheaf. This practice stems from the Celtic carving of turnip-lamps for Samhain adapted to the (better-suited) American gourd, and so purists may reject it as being not properly Germanic - but our folk were never shy about borrowing, especially from the Celts. Those with both Germanic and Celtic heritage (that is, most Americans and British), may like to carve such pumpkins at Winternights and leave them up until November 1.