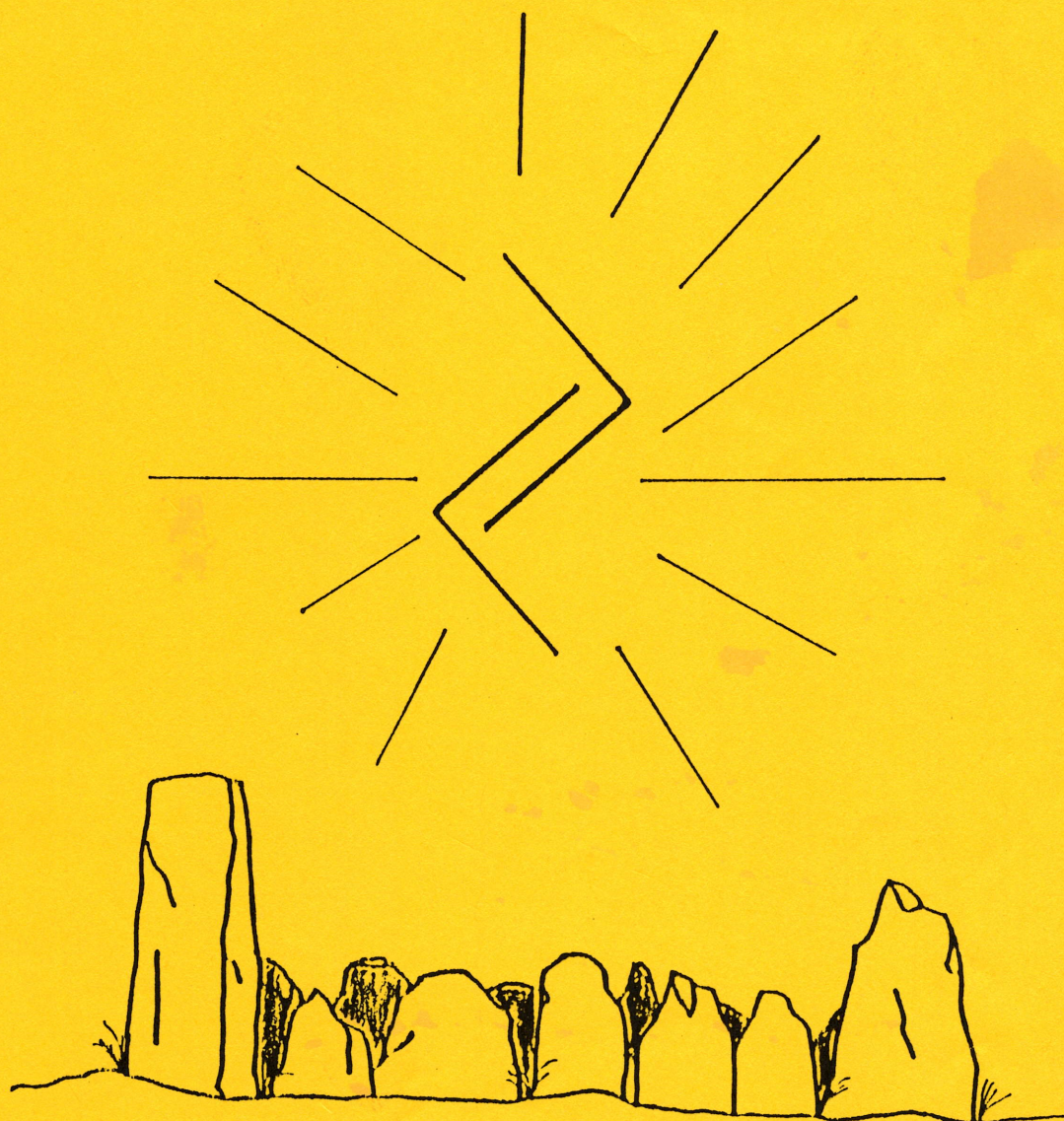


Rituals of Asatru

Volume Two – SEASONAL FESTIVALS



Stephen A. McNallen

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Foreword

The material in these pages is designed to complement two other publications in this series: Major Blóts and Rites of Passage, Volumes One and Three respectively of the Rituals of Asatru.

Volume One is necessary to perform the seasonal festivals in this book as they were intended. Without that volume, however, the rites given here can still be integrated into rituals of one's own design. As much as we like our selection of blóts, they aren't the only way to do things!

The same warning applies to the yearly festival calendar described here. Many readers will not be comfortable with it, because it departs from tradition somewhat - especially in attributing Yule to Thor rather than Frey. Those who would prefer the reverse can easily change the ritual to meet their needs and wishes.

As in the companion volumes, we have written as though a godi ("priest") was performing the ceremonies honoring Gods, and as if a gydja ("priestess") was carrying out the rites dedicated to Goddesses. This is merely a stylistic approach to get around the "he/she - his/her" problem; a person of either sex can officiate at any of these festivals.

Special thanks are due to Robert Stine of Raven Graphics whose artwork has been invaluable and to Maddy Hutter who not only did the actual production work but also contributed many of the ideas that went into these rituals.

Stephen A. McNallen
Breckenridge, Texas
April 1985

The Ritual Year

Constructing a coherent calendar of religious events is impossible using the historical bits and scraps available to us from European prehistory. Some festivals were celebrated in one area, but not in another. Some were based on astronomical occurrences, others on happenings in the agricultural year, such as the lactation of ewes or the first day of plowing. These latter were conditioned by climate among other things, and so varied from place to place. The Icelandic calendar recognized only two seasons and thus had little to do with the ordering of things in England or on the Continent. Confusion is increased by the question of which deities are to be the focus of these holy days. The fact is, these factors varied from place to place and from time to time among our ancestors.

In keeping with the broad sweep of native European religious tradition (as opposed to its narrow application in any one time or place) the Asatru Free Assembly recognizes a "wheel of the year" featuring the solstices, equinoxes, and the points halfway in between each of these, called the "crossquarter days". This gives us a symmetrical wheel with eight spokes, reminiscent of the eight legs of Odin's horse.

The solstices and equinoxes are dedicated to the Aesir, and the crossquarters to the Vanir (Frey and Freya alternately). The result is symmetrical, honors both families of gods equally, and matches deities to festivals in a way that is consistent with the nature of the seasons in question.

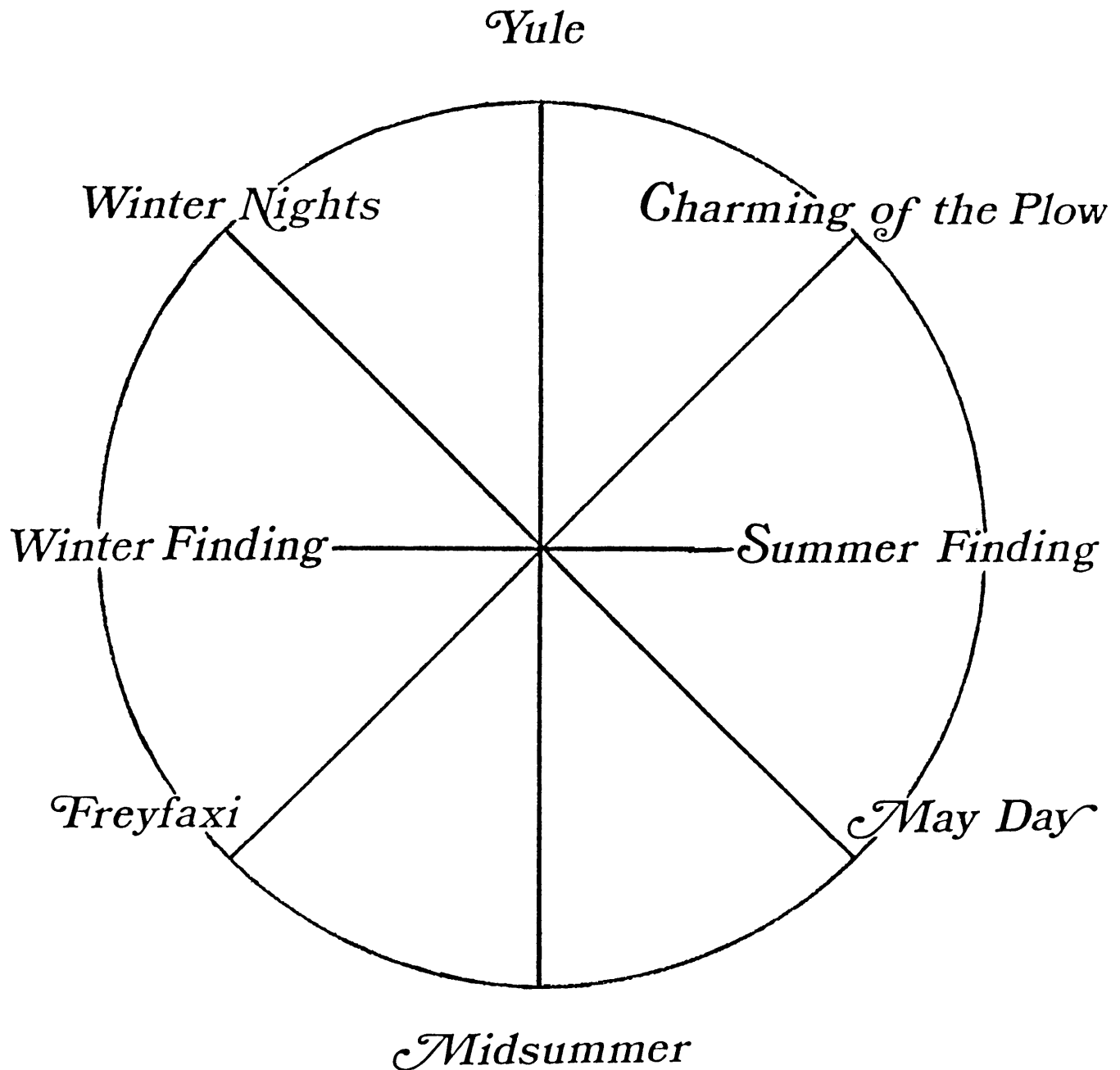
The dates for these festivals are

Yule -- about December 21
Charming of the Plow -- February 2
Summer Finding -- about March 21
May Day -- May 1
Midsummer -- about June 21
Freyfaxi -- August 1
Winter Finding -- about September 21
Winter Nights -- October 31

Doubtless other calendars can be constructed -- the AFA has experimented with several -- but we believe this scheme has marked advantages over those we have seen.

The wheel of the year is represented graphically on the following page.

The Wheel of the Year



Days of Remembrance

In addition to the great seasonal festivals, certain other days are held in high regard by the followers of Asatru. These may or may not be publicly celebrated. One could sponsor a blót or a party on these dates, and such is encouraged, but as a minimum each of us should briefly contemplate the significance of the day in question and, just as importantly, link that contemplation to an action.

The Days of Remembrance of the religion of Asatru are:

January 9 - Raud the Strong was a landowner of great renown in Halogaland who refused to abandon Asatru. Olaf the Traitor, known to history as Olaf Tryggvason, the king of Norway, had him captured and tortured to death. The method of this torture was simple: Olaf the Traitor forced a snake down Raud's throat. With Raud out of the way, his lands and goods were confiscated.

February 9 - Another Halogalander who refused to switch from Asatru to Christianity was Eyvind Kinnrifi. Olaf the Traitor placed a bowl of red-hot embers on his stomach until his belly burst open. A good day for reflecting on Christian kindness.

March 9 - Olvir was an adherent of Asatru who persisted in organizing sacrifices to the gods despite decrees by Olaf the Lawbreaker forbidding such activities. Thanks to an informer, he was discovered and killed by Olaf's men on an undetermined date while preparing for the Spring sacrifice in the village of Maerin. Many other men whose names are lost to us were killed, mutilated or exiled for taking part in these activities.

March 28 - Ragnar Lodbrok sacked Paris on this date in 845 C.E. and according to the chronicles, made a point of despoiling the churches (that's where the gold was!). Fly a Raven Banner from your house today.

May 9 - On this day we honor Guthroth, one of the local Uppland kings who opposed Olaf the Lawbreaker and in fact made an eloquent speech against Olaf which is reminiscent of Patrick Henry's speech of American Revolution days. Guthroth was captured and his tongue was cut off by "Saint" Olaf.

June 8 - On this date in the year 793 C.E., three Viking ships swept down on the isle of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria, and more or less officially began the Viking Age. The repercussions of this raid, which included the sacking of the local monastery, shocked all Christendom. Buy a fellow pagan a drink today.

July 29 - Olaf the Lawbreaker, known to history as Saint Olaf of Norway, was killed at the battle of Stikklestad in 1030 C.E.. Olaf acquired a reputation for killing, maiming, torturing, or exiling his fellow Norwegians who would not convert to Christianity, and for carrying an army with him about the countryside in violation of the law to help him accomplish his deeds.

August 9 - On this day we honor a hero of our religion who actually predates the Viking Age by a few years -- one Radbod, a king of Frisia, who died in 719 C.E.. Radbod was one of the early targets of the Christian conversion efforts, and it looked as if they had succeeded. Just before the ceremony of baptism was to be performed, however, the king asked the clergy what had befallen those of his ancestors who had died in heathendom. The missionary replied that Radbod's pagan forefathers were no doubt roasting in hell, to which the Frisian king responded, "Then I will rather live there with my ancestors than go to heaven with a parcel of beggars." The baptism was cancelled, the churches were burned, the priests were killed, and Frisia remained free. The date of August 9, to honor this event was chosen more or less arbitrarily.

October 8 - Leif Erikson is honored by an American holiday on October 9 for his discovery of America, but no one pays much attention to his father, Erik the Red. The old patriarch clung to the religion of his ancestors despite the defection of his son, who was a missionary for Olaf Tryggvason, and the conversion of his wife who then refused to live with her heathen husband. October 8 is the day we honor our co-religionist, Erik.

Those Days of Remembrance which do not originate from a clearly defined event with a known date are celebrated on the ninth day of their respective months because of the religious significance of the number in the religion of the North.



Yule

Yule is held in honor of the returning Sun, which begins its long sojourn back to the Northlands at the Winter Solstice. Usually this falls on or about December 21. No matter that the Springtime is yet months away -- the spell of Winter is being steadily undone and the cycle of life continues!

In at least some places and times, Yule was sacred to the god Frey. We, however, honor doughty Thor at this time of year. Thor has broken the back of Winter with his mighty Mjollnir. His holy hammer, which blessed the funeral pyre of Balder, has regenerated the Sun itself. Friendly Thor warms us in the banquet hall with his glowing comradeship, and gives plentiful food and drink as we would expect from such a great trencherman. Even today Thor's goats are a popular theme in Scandinavia, and our children are regaled with stories of a red-clad, bearded being who rides in a vehicle pulled through the air by reindeer -- or was it goats?

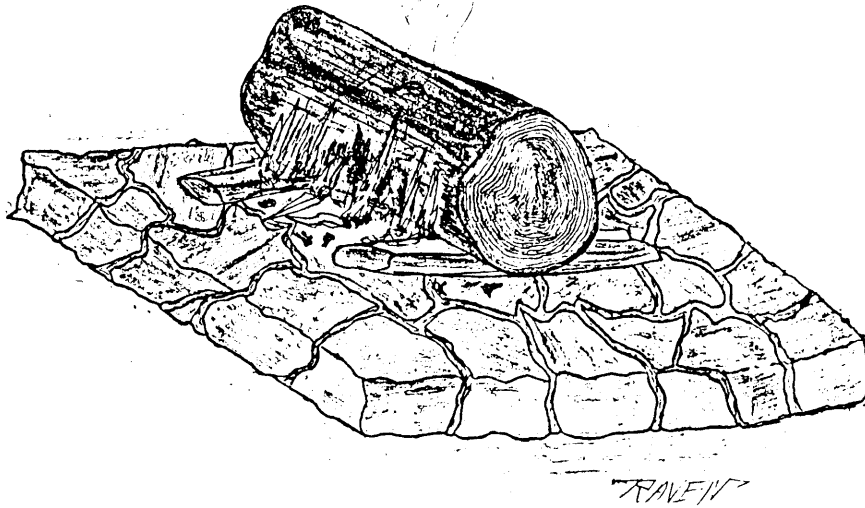
The Sun's return is one focus of Yule, for it presages, however dimly, the oncoming of the distant Springtime. Another key idea of Yule, however, is that the family line, past, present, and future, is an unbroken whole.

Many of our Christian customs derive from ancient sources or have ancient parallels. Christmas trees become Yule trees sporting different symbols and representing the World-Tree and the life force. Followers of Asatru can send Yule cards, preferably made rather than purchased. The care and love we show to family members is every bit in keeping with the spirit of Yule in Asatru, and certainly these bonds should be observed and strengthened.

We must remember that the clan includes those members who have died and gone on into the other world. In the old days, tables of food were set aside for these kinsmen and beds were prepared for their ease. Today we can resort to cups of mead and small cakes. These "offerings" serve the role of making us mindful of our dead ancestors and prompting us to meditation on them. After these gifts have served their purpose they can be poured out upon the ground as an offering to Frigga, our Mother Earth.

The Yule log is a reminder that this season is one of fire, of the Sun, and that we long for a return of light and warmth. Whereas the fires of other Northern European festivals are generally in the form of huge outdoor bonfires, the fire aspect of Yule is indoors and is identified with the roaring fire of the convivial feast. The Yule log was traditionally of oak but other woods will do just as well, and the scarcity of oak trees makes their use almost sacriligious in some areas anyway -- if we chop them all down, there obviously won't be any more oak trees. A small bit of the log should be preserved and kept in the home, for -- so the tradition goes -- it will protect the house from fire and from lightning. This piece of the Yule log is then used to help kindle next year's fire.

So what ceremony do we use to mark the passage of the season?



The ritual begins with a Thor-Blót which continues in the standard way down to the part where the godi sprinkles the people and says "I give you the blessing of Thor!" At this point a chant begins, with the godi saying a line and the people replying with "The Sun shall be reborn!"

Godi: "THOUGH NORTHLANDS ARE COVERED WITH SNOW...
(People: "The Sun shall be reborn!")

THOUGH WINTRY WINDS NOW BLOW...
THOUGH THE FOREST IS FILLED WITH FOG...
WHILE FLAMES CONSUME THE LOG...
WHILE THE BEAR SLEEPS IN HIS LAIR...
OUR KINSMEN MEET WITH LOVING CARE...
WHILE FOLK FILL FLAGONS OF MEAD...
WHILE HEROES BOAST OF DEEDS...
WHILE THE FARMER STEAMS HIS BREATH...
THOUGH EARTH LIES STILL AS DEATH...
WHILE THOR OUR HOPE INSPIRES...
AS FOLK WATCH FLICKERING FIRES...
WITH YULE LOG BLAZING BRIGHT...
IN DARKNESS-DAUNTED LIGHT...
THE COLD AND FOG WON'T LAST...
RELEASED FROM WINTER'S GRASP...
FOR WINTER SHALL BEGIN TO FLEE...
BY THE SUNWHEEL WE ARE FREE..."

At this point the godi takes a Sunwheel of straw or other flammable material and hands it to the nearest person on the right side of the altar, at that time starting the group chant of

"TURNING SUN AND THOR'S GREAT TOKEN,
WINTER'S SPELL IS BEING BROKEN!"

This chant continues as the Sunwheel is slowly passed clockwise from person to person, until it completes the circle and is returned to the godi. As he receives it, the chant stops and he intones:

"IN THE MYSTERY OF LIFE, DEATH, AND REGENERATION THE SUN IS REBORN
IN THE SKIES AS SURELY AS THIS EARTHLY SUNWHEEL IS CONSUMED BY FLAMES."

He places the Sunwheel in the fire. As it burns, the people chant

"BURN, WHEEL, BURN! TURN, SUN, TURN!"

When it is fully consumed the godi signals for silence and completes the Thor-Blót in the usual manner. The sacrifice done, all retire to the feast where they will praise the gods and their ancestors.



Charming of the Plow

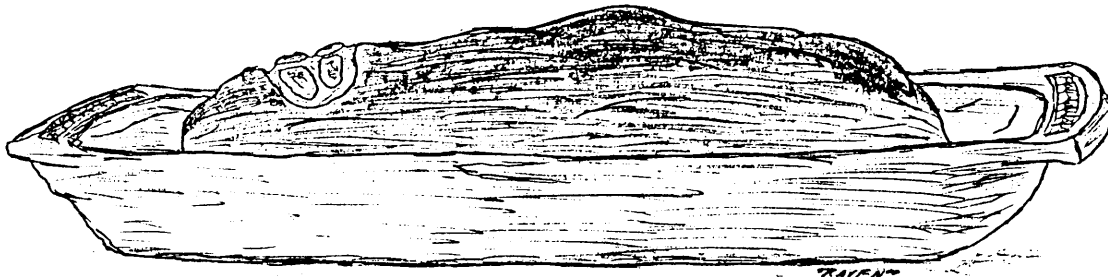
Fertility of the soil has been one of the primary aims of religious ritual since the discovery of agriculture in far prehistory. A dependency on the weather and on the richness of the soil has preoccupied human life from those primordial days down to the present, establishing a continuity which has become synonymous with rootedness and stability. This full participation of man in Nature has been celebrated by many thinkers and writers; certainly the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun was in touch with this idea, and he would have instinctively understood the ritual we call the Charming of the Plow.

In ancient times a fertility rite was done at the beginning of the plowing season. Wrapped in Christian externals it has survived down to the present, but the spirit and origin are very ancient and thoroughly heathen.

Parts of the ceremony given here have been adapted from a very old Anglo-Saxon charm called the "Aecer-Bot", or "remedy for cultivated land". This in turn is a Christianized version of earlier material, and we have simply reworded it so that it is in harmony with its original nature.

The day before Charming of the Plow, a special ceremonial loaf of bread is baked. It is made of meal from as many different grains as possible and is kneaded with milk and water. It should be about the size of a person's hand, and have a Sunwheel (☼) marked in its surface.

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On February 2, the celebrants gather in a field and the godi begins a Frey-Blót. It proceeds as usual down to the point where all the participants have taken the mead. Instead of finishing the blót, the godi says

"I STAND AT THE EAST, READY TO RECEIVE BOUNTIES. I PRAY THE GLORIOUS LORD, THE GREAT RULER, THE HOLY GUARDIAN OF THE HEAVENS. I PRAY TO THE EARTH AND TO THE SKY ABOVE AND TO ALL THE GODS AND GODDESSES OF OUR PEOPLE, TO THE MIGHT OF THE LIFEGIVERS. I PRAY THAT I MAY THUS ROUSE UP CROPS FOR USE IN THE WORLD, FILL THIS EARTH IN FIRM FAITH, MAKE BEAUTIFUL THESE GRASSY PLAINS."

Emptying a container of water upon the soil, he says

"SKY FATHER, COVER YOUR CONSORT THAT LIFE MAY BE."

then continues with

"ERCE, ERCE, ERCE, MOTHER OF EARTH,
MAY THE ALL-WIELDER, LORD ETERNAL,
GIVE FLOURISHING ACRES OF SPROUTING SHOOTS,
ACRES BOUNTIFUL BRINGING TO HARVEST
TALL STALKS AND SHINING GROWTH,
ACRES OF BROAD HARVEST OF BARLEY,
ACRES OF WHITE HARVEST OF WHEAT,
AND ALL THE HARVESTS OF EARTH!
MAY MOTHER EARTH AND FATHER SKY
DEFEND THIS GROWTH FROM EVERY FOE
THAT IT MAY BE SHIELDED FROM EVERY EVIL,
AND EVERY SORCERY SOWED THROUGH THE LAND.
NOW I PRAY THE ALL-WIELDER WHO SHAPED THE WORLD
THAT THERE BE NO WOMAN SO WAGGING OF TONGUE,
NOR ANY MAN SO CUNNING OF CRAFT,
THAT MAY EVER PERVERT THE WORDS THUS SPOKEN!"

He digs a spade of soil and says

"BE HEALED, O EARTH, O MOTHER OF MEN,
BE HALE AND GROWING BY GRACE OF LORD AND LADY:
BE FILLED WITH FOOD FOR THE USE OF PEOPLE!"

The ceremonial loaf is now taken and laid in a shallow hole in the ground. The godi speaks again --

"ACRE GROW FULL WITH FOOD FOR MEN
BRIGHTLY BLOWING, BE THOU BLESSED
IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY SKY FATHER ABOVE,
AND EARTH MOTHER WHEREON WE LIVE.
MAY THE HOLY ONES GRANT SPROUTING GIFTS
THAT EACH KIND OF GRAIN MAY GROW FOR MEN."

Pouring mead upon the ground, he prays

"TO THEE A LIBATION, AND A MEMORY OF YOUR FRUITS IN TIME PAST. HAIL
TO THEE!"

Now each person comes forward and places a little soil in the hole with the bread, until it is filled. After the last person has returned to his or her place, the godi finishes with the remainder of the Frey-Blót ("The sacrifice is done...").



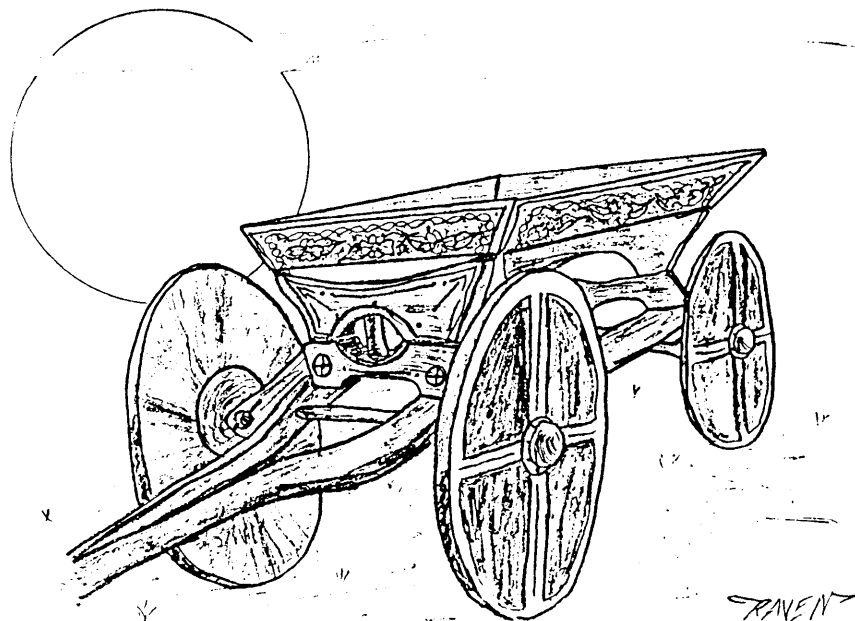
Summer Finding

At the Spring Equinox, about March 21, the Sun's strength has increased until day and night are of equal length. The first day of Spring has arrived. We are one quarter of the way around the year from Yule, and the promise of the glowing orb's return has been visibly fulfilled, for the days are warmer and signs of new life are everywhere in the greening fields and blossoming flowers. It is a time of rebirth and renewal, a time to give praise to our Mother the Earth, Frigga.

Ostara is the name by which we call Frigga on this day. Her name later became corrupted to "Easter" but originally this title was used by the Saxons who considered her a goddess of the dawn. The very appellation "Ostara" is related to the old word for the East, where the Sun heralds its rising each day.

Many of the popular Easter symbols are of pre-Christian origin, and are completely suitable for honoring our goddess on this occasion. The egg is an ancient sign of fertility, and we of Asatru today have been known to have Ostara-egg hunts for our children, complete with rune-decorated eggs. Likewise, our forefathers would have been entirely comfortable with the hare motif which modern culture has associated with Easter.

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To celebrate the return of life to the forest and fields and the renewed vigor we feel within ourselves at the approach of Spring, begin by offering a blót to Frigga. Just at the point in the blót where the gydja pours the charged mead into the bowl and dips the evergreen into it, four men from the assembled people come forward. Each carries in his hands a large wheel made from a circle of cardboard and brightly decorated. They place themselves two in front of her and two behind, symbolizing the wagon of the goddess with their bodies and the wheels they carry. Thus arranged, the gydja and her escorts proceed among the celebrants and sprinkle them with the mead, just as the goddess blessed the crops in the old days. Participants should be encouraged to bring with them soil from their fields if they are rural folk, or from their gardens or flower beds if they are city dwellers.

The gydja returns to the altar. Her escorts set aside their wheels and in turn sprinkle her with water from a bowl, saying as they do

"MAY THE POWER OF FRIGGA GROW STRONG"

She returns the blessing by touching each of them on the forehead and intoning

"MAY FRIGGA GIVE US REBIRTH!"

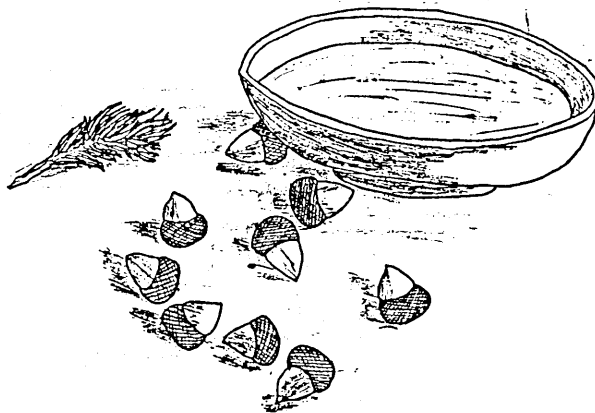
From this point the gydja resumes the Frigga-Blot to complete the rite of Summer Finding.



May Day

The first day of May is a time of great celebration all across Europe, as the fields get greener and the flowers decorate the landscape with colorful confusion. Human life responds to this surging of the life-force, too; May is commonly known as a lusty month, and a young man's fancy does not turn to celibacy in the Springtime!

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The gentle breezes and refreshing rains make our minds drift to thoughts of lovely Freya -- and our celebration begins with a blót in her honor. After she has been invoked and given sacrifice, and after the mead has been filled with her essence, the gydja drinks as usual, then uses the mead to bless a number of seeds which have been placed on the altar. These seeds may be of any sort compatible with the local climate. As she asperges them she prays

"FREYA, BLESS THESE SEEDS THAT THEY MAY GROW AND GIVE PLEASURE TO US,
AND GLORY TO YOUR NAME."

Now each person comes forward -- in male/female pairs as much as possible or singly. The gydja sprinkles couples or individuals, saying

"I GIVE YOU THE BLESSING OF FREYA!"

and gives them one of the seeds from the altar. They take the seed, turn, and walk toward the surrounding area where they can plant their seed.

Having enclosed the seed in the womb of the Earth, participants return to the ritual space where the gydja instructs them to link hands, and in unison, make the following chant (repeated three times)

"OUR SEED WE'VE PLANTED IN THE GROUND;
FREYA, LET NEW LIFE ABOUND."

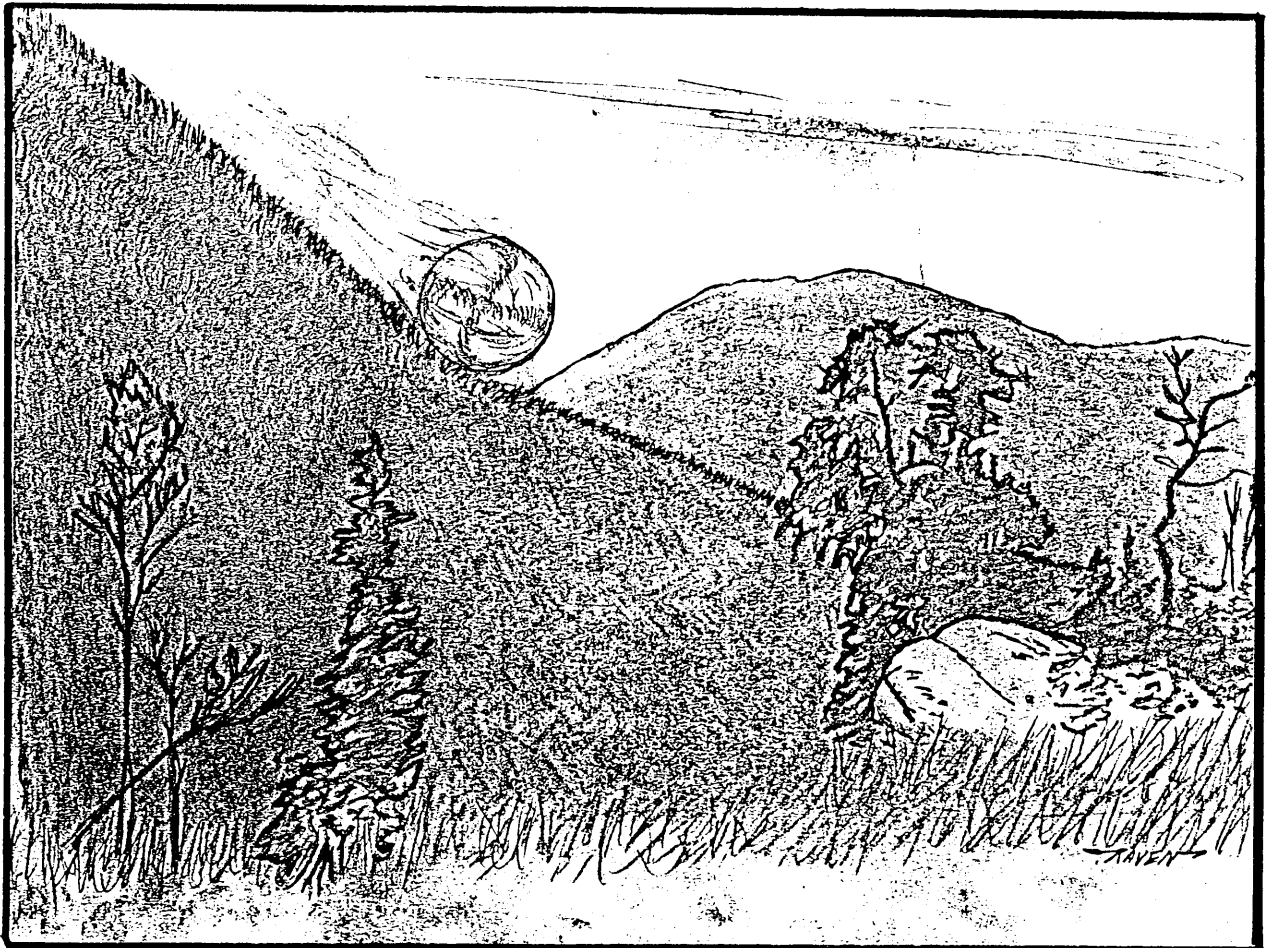
The gydja then concludes the blót in the usual manner.

Midsummer

The gradual process that began at Yule reaches its culmination at Midsummer, when the days are longest and the nights shortest. The Sun has won its victory over the dark, and bathes the land in its warmth. But time is a circle rather than a line, and now is a time of turning. We celebrate the Sun's ascendancy while we can, for tomorrow the day will be shorter, and the slow march into Winter will have imperceptibly begun. We console ourselves with the thought that the decline of the solar orb is not the end, for as surely as it dies it will be born again, six months away at the Winter Solstice.

Since Balder is connected with the Sun and with the idea of rebirth, we honor him at Midsummer.

* * * * *



The Balder-Blót is begun in the usual way. Immediately after bearing the horn around to the people, the godi places himself at the altar and cries out

"EVEN AS THE OAK LIVES, SO MUST IT DIE. AS THE WARRIOR STANDS,
SO MUST HE BE STRUCK DOWN. AS THE SUN WAXES, SO MUST IT WANE.
BUT THE WISE KNOW THAT THE DOWN-GOING IS BUT A PRELUDE TO REBIRTH.
BALDER, MASTER OF REBIRTH, SPEAK IN OUR HEARTS THE SECRETS THAT YOUR
FATHER WHISPERED IN YOUR EAR, THAT WE TOO MAY TAKE PART IN THIS
HOLY MYSTERY."

At this point the godi kindles the bonfire, or gives the signal for others to do so. As the flames spring into life, he makes the Hammersign over them and say

"AS THOR CONSECRATED BALDER'S FUNERAL FIRE WITH HIS MIGHTY HAMMER,
SO DO I CONSECRATE AND BLESS THIS FIRE IN THE SIGN OF THE HAMMER
AND IN THE HOLY NAMES OF ODIN, BALDER, FREY, AND THOR!"

Now each person comes forward and places a stick in the Midsummer fire for luck in accordance with ancient custom. Later, when the blaze has died down, a flammable Sunwheel is brought and thrown into the fire, and the celebrants leap over it to rid themselves of unwanted influences, if they wish. In former times it was traditional to roll a fiery Sunwheel down a hillside, but in most areas this will not be practical because of the fire danger.



Freyfaxi

In ancient times there was a harvest festival held toward the end of August throughout Scandinavia. One feature of this celebration involved horse fights and other activities associated with the god Frey. We have references in the sagas to horses especially dedicated to this god -- Olaf Tryggvason defiled one such animal by riding it, and Hrafnkel's Saga deals with a priest of Frey in Iceland who owned a similar animal. In both instances, the horse was named "Freyfaxi", or "Frey's Mane" -- hence the name we have given to this festival. It is a day of rejoicing, and a time for reaping what one has sown.

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A Frey-Blót is used at Freyfaxi. It runs its usual course until the invocation is completed. As the godi pronounces the words "WE INVOKE YOU..." a member of the group comes forth. This individual represents a horse, and should be costumed accordingly with a mask and perhaps a sheet covering his body. He prances clockwise about the circle of people while they all hold out their hands, as if offering him food, while chanting

"HORSE AND HARVEST DONE TODAY,
HURT AND HUNGER GONE AWAY!"

The horse completes the circle and stands before the godi, who likewise makes a gesture as if feeding him. Now again the horse dances about the circle, a bit more energetically than before, as each participant makes a stabbing motion at him to the chant

"BY THE ROD AND BY THE FLOWER,
GOAD THE HORSE AND RAISE THE POWER!"

One circuit and he again stands before the godi, who makes a final gesture as if to strike him, then the horse falls as the godi resumes the Frey-Blót, speaking the words "AND WE OFFER YOU SACRIFICE!" and continuing the ritual in the standard way.

When the godi reaches the part of the ritual where the mead is sprinkled with the evergreen, he asperges the fallen horse as well. The horse then rises, given the gift of life again by the power of the god Frey, and joins in the ceremony to its conclusion.



Winter Finding

Winter Finding is celebrated on the Fall Equinox, on or about September 21st. The nights and days are of equal length now, and tomorrow night will be longer than the day, as the Sun continues to decline to its nadir at Yule. It is a time of inward turning, of conserving the personal and group resources as we seek the things that will help us struggle through the approaching death of the Sun -- Ragnarok in miniature.

We are reminded of the greater Ragnarok against which Allfather Odin prepared by his endless questing for knowledge and numinous power. In this searching for wisdom and foresight we have models for ourselves, as sons and daughters of Odin. Re-creating these spiritual journeys in ceremonial form gives us a way of connecting with the cosmic world of the myths while at the same time fortifying ourselves against all threats to ourselves and to our kin. Thus, the Winter Finding ritual captures the essence of Odin's drinking from Mimir's well of wisdom, of the seizing of the mead of inspiration, and of the winning of the runes.

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Dusk is the best time for this rite. The desired mood is serious, with participants dressed accordingly. The ceremony begins with the people standing in a circle -- preferably around a tree -- with their backs to the center of the circle. Beside the tree stands the godi. The ritual begins as he raises the gandr and intones

"NORTH AND SOUTH AND EAST AND WEST, BE THIS PLACE BY ODIN BLESSED.
BY THIS STAFF OF MIGHT, SO BE IT DONE!

ODIN! HIGH ONE! WINTER'S COLD APPROACHES AND THE SUN WANES. HARD
TIMES ARE THESE FOR THE FOLK AS DARKNESS MARSHALLS FORCE. LEST
RAGNAROK FIND US UNPREPARED WE SEEK WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE, WITH YOU
AS OUR MODEL AND GUIDE. BE WITH US, ALLFATHER, AS WE RIDE THE PATH
YOU WELL KNOW!"

Elevating a horn filled with water, he says

"MAY THE POWERS FILL THIS WATER WITH WISDOM AND HOLINESS THAT IT
MAY BE FOR US AS THE WATER FROM MIMIR'S SPRING WAS TO 'ALLFATHER!"

at which point he pronounces the word ALU -- a runic formula of power --
while breathing onto the water's surface. Now he reads

"UNDER ONE ROOT OF THE WORLD TREE LIES THE SPRING OF MIMIR, IN
WHICH IS HIDDEN WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING. MIMIR IS FULL OF
WISDOM BECAUSE HE DRINKS WATER FROM THE SPRING OUT OF THE HORN
CALLED GJOLL. ALLFATHER CAME THERE AND ASKED FOR A SINGLE DRINK
FROM THE SPRING, BUT HE DID NOT GET IT UNTIL HE HAD GIVEN ONE
OF HIS EYES AS A PLEDGE."

The godi goes to each person in the ring and asks them the question

"WHAT WILL YOU GIVE FOR WISDOM?"

He pauses as each person silently makes his or her own private commitment,
then offers a drink from the horn. Each meditates upon the price of wisdom
as the godi continues to the next participant. When this is done the godi
returns to the center of the circle and fills the horn with mead. Again
he offers it skyward as he prays

"ODIN, FILL THIS MEAD WITH INSPIRATION THAT IT MAY BE FOR US AS THE
MEAD YOU STOLE FOR THE GOOD OF GODS AND HUMANKIND!"

He pronounces the ALU chant as before, breathing on the surface of the mead
as he does so. Now he reads

"ODIN DRANK THE MEAD THAT GUNNLOD OFFERED, AND CHANGED HIMSELF INTO AN EAGLE AND SWIFTLY FLEW AWAY. WHEN SUTTUNG SAW THE EAGLE IN FLIGHT, HOWEVER, HE ALSO TOOK ON EAGLE SHAPE AND FLEW AFTER HIM. NOW WHEN THE AESIR SAW WHERE ODIN WAS FLYING, THEY PUT THEIR CROCKS OUT IN THE COURTYARD, AND WHEN ODIN CAME INSIDE ASGARD, HE SPAT THE MEAD INTO THE CROCKS. THUS WE GAINED THE MEAD THAT MAKES POET OR SCHOLAR OF THOSE WHO DRINK OF IT."

Carrying the horn to each of the people in the circle he tells them to

"DRINK THE MEAD OF INSPIRATION. WHAT DOES IT TELL YOU?"

After drinking, each looks within for the divine spark of inspiration inside them and meditates upon it while bidding it grow. The godi, meanwhile, returns to his position by the tree and reads the stanzas from the Elder Edda describing Odin's winning of the runes:

"WOUNDED I HUNG ON A WIND-SWEPT GALLOWS
FOR NINE LONG NIGHTS,
PIERCED BY A SPEAR, PLEDGED TO ODIN,
OFFERED, MYSELF TO MYSELF:
THE WISEST KNOW NOT FROM WHENCE SPRING
THE ROOTS OF THAT ANCIENT TREE.
THEY GAVE ME NO BREAD, THEY GAVE ME NO MEAD:
I LOOKED DOWN: WITH A LOUD CRY
I TOOK UP RUNES OF POWER: FROM THAT TREE I FELL."

Now he leads the ring of people nine times clockwise about the tree, aided perhaps by a drumbeat. When the ninth circuit is finished he approaches each individual and presses the point of a bladed weapon -- ideally a spear -- to the person's breast, after which they are allowed to plunge their hand into a black cloth bag and withdraw a single rune inscribed on a piece of wood or bone. After drawing their rune, each one sits on the ground and silently contemplates the rune and its meaning for a period of two or three minutes. When this time of meditation has elapsed, the godi speaks:

"ODIN, WE HAVE DARED TO SEEK INSPIRATION THAT THE FOLK MAY BE PROTECTED AND PREPARED IN TIME OF HARDNESS AND STRIFE. SO WARDED, MAY WE PERSEVERE, AND WITNESS THE COMING RESURGENCE IN THE HEAVENS AND IN THE HEARTS OF OUR PEOPLE. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR PRESENCE. BE MINDFUL OF US, AND FARE WELL IN WANDERINGS!"

Raising the gandr he concludes with the words

"ODIN WAS WITH US HERE TODAY, WISDOM SPEED US ON OUR WAY! SO BE IT DONE!"



Winter Nights



Winter Nights is a time of seeking shelter in the resources of our kin and ourselves, for cold weather will soon be upon us and the fires of life must be banked to survive the blasts of Winter. The mood is a bit somber, yet hopeful; serious, but with its lighter side as well.

Winter Nights is Freya's feast -- not the Freya of green meadow and unfolding flower, but the Freya of falling leaves and browning grass. Protection and conservation are the watchwords of the season.

The disir (singular dis) are honored at this festival. These are spirits concerned with fertility, well-being, and the continuance of natural processes. Although personalized to the point of being considered female, they are essentially undifferentiated; we know the name of no dis except the great Dis herself, Freya. Disir seem to be very similar to the household spirits of later Scandinavian folklore, whose friendship could be solicited by offerings of milk or ale, and who can turn against people who have somehow offended them.

The fylgjur (singular fylgja) seem to be a particular kind of dis. A fylgja is attached to a person or a family as a sort of protective spirit, but it has no local habitation or individual name. According to Foote and Wilson in The Viking Achievement the fylgjur "appear to have represented the inherent faculty for achievement that existed in a family's offspring. Everyday observation of consonant or discrepant facts of heredity would confirm that it was possible for a fylgja to desert an individual or to be rejected by him."

Regardless of how one conceives of the disir, it behooves us to salute those subtle natural forces of fertility and fortune. This is one of the functions of Winter Nights, when we give thanksgiving for the Autumn harvest, and express our hope for continued life through the coming Winter, when life seems to retreat underground before the ice and snow.

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The Freya-Blót forms the core of the Winter Nights observance. Just after the power of the goddess has charged the mead, the gydja speaks

FREYA, IN SPRINGTIME WE BASKED IN THE WARMTH OF THE SUN AND MARVELLED AS YOUR CORNSILK HAIR BLEW IN THE SWEET BREEZES, BUT NOW THAT IS PAST US. HOLD US CLOSE THAT WE MAY SHARE THE SUSTAINING WARMTH OF YOUR BREAST, AND LET YOUR FRAGRANCE REPLACE THAT OF THE FLOWERS NOW COVERED WITH FALLEN LEAVES OF AUTUMN. ALL WHO LIVE MUST DIE, BUT THE CIRCLE IS COMPLETE, AND ALL WHO DIE WILL LIVE AGAIN. LIFE WORKS ITS WAY AND WE ARE AT EASE WITH OUR FATE: WE CLASP IT TO US AND RESOLVE TO PLAY IT WELL. INWARD WE TURN FOR STRENGTH, AND BEING STRONG, WE WILL SURVIVE THIS SEASON, TOO. ICE CRYSTALS GIRDLE THE MOON AND THE DAYS ARE SHORTER. FREYA, SWEET MISTRESS OF BIRTH AND DEATH, WE ARE MINDFUL OF YOU IN THIS SEASON; BE YOU MINDFUL OF US.

Having done this, she continues with the Freya-Blót to the point where the mead horn has passed around the circle. Standing again before the altar, she steps to the north and says

TO THE DISIR OF THE NORTH, AN OFFERING!

as she pours a bit of the remaining mead onto the ground (or into a libation bowl, if indoors). Walking to the east, south, and west respectively, she offers a portion of mead to the disir in those directions, using the same formula. Returning to her position in front of the altar she finishes the blót.



