

The Way of Woden: The Runic Mysteries of the Hidden God of the North by Stephen Flowers

Woden, known among the Norse as Odhinn, is the mightiest of the Germanic gods. He is master of skald-craft (poetry), and ecstatic techniques. He is also seen as the ghostly and terrifying leader of the wild hunt and the ecstatic band of warriors known as berserks. Woden is the primal ancestor of the royal houses of the north -- the Anglo-Saxon kings of England counted them selves as descendents of Woden. Even in ancient times this high god of the Germanic peoples -- the Germans, English, Dutch, Scandinavians, and the now vanished Goths -- was a figure that inspired fear and terror as often as he did awe and deep reverence. For Woden embodies all the mysteries of the human psychophysical complex with all its wonderful contradictions and paradoxes, as well as its virtually unlimited power and capabilities. In understanding the mysteries of Woden we can begin not only to comprehend the timeless and archetypal character of the hidden god of the northern world dwelling eternally within his people, but also to grasp the universal mystery of the human psyche. Like no other traditional god, Woden is the god of the eternal quest of the human spirit to become, and to gain knowledge and power over itself and over nature.

The first key to the mysteries of Woden is found in his name. "Woden" is the English form of the name ultimately derived from a Proto-Germanic(1) form Wodh-an-az, which means the "master of inspired psychic activity." According to regular linguistic rules of development, Wodhanaz becomes Woden in English, Wodan or Wotan in German, and Odhinn in Icelandic, where the initial "w" drops off before certain vowels (hence the form "Odin"). In the Proto-Germanic stem, wodh is the element meaning "inspired psychic activity." The true character of this activity is complex. It can mean anything on a continuum from the furor of battle frenzy to the reflective inspiration resulting in a finely crafted skaldic poem. (By the way, skaldic poetry is perhaps the most complex form of poetry known in any language.) The spiritual quality implied by this characteristic reveals why Woden is not only considered the high god of the Germanic peoples, but is also known as the "All-Father (ON Alfodhr) -- for he, along with other aspects of himself, imparted this gift to humanity.(2)

One of the chief sources for Woden's won inspiration and knowledge -- for which he has an insatiable thirst -- is the perhaps "shamanistic" initiatory ordeal he underwent hanging on the World Tree, Yggdrasil (=the steed of Ygg/Woden). In this process, discussed in more detail below, Woden grasps and integrates runic knowledge. The actual meaning of the word "rune" (Proto-Germanic runo) is "mystery" or "secret" -- only secondarily does "rune" represent the visible signs (i.e. elements in numinous code) which magically help in the understanding and utilization of the true mysteries of which the signs are an outer manifestation.(3) It is the hidden code embodied in the runes which serves to guide Woden's own initiatory path, and it is that which he imparts to his kith and kin here in Midgard or Middle Earth.

Woden: the Living God

In ancient times it was Woden among the gods who most often intervened in human affairs -- sometimes with shockingly tragic consequences. He continued to do so even after the coming of Christianity -- although usually from behind one of his many masks. In the last two hundred years he has progressively emerged from behind his various masks until we can say that in our own era no other god from antiquity has shown himself to be as vital and purely alive as Woden. The most dramatic -- and ultimately the most tragic -- outbreak of this vitality was in the German-speaking areas of central Europe during the first half of the 20th century. To be sure, not all that happened in that time and place was the inspired work of Woden! The stream of Woden's vitality was broad and deep and was, unfortunately, misdirected by those who did not really understand it.

This stream of vitality first rushed forth through the German Romantics, culminating in the Gesamtkunstwerke of Richard Wagner. It became more focused by such men as Guido von List, Otto Sigfrid Reuter, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, and others.(4) In the 1930s this was so strong and apparently so connected to the Wodenic archetype that C. G. Jung was moved to write his essay "Wotan" in 1936. In it Jung writes what is not only a profound analogy for how the archetype of Wotan was re-emerging, but how any inherited archetypal pattern can also:

"Archetypes are like river beds which dry up when the water deserts them, but which it can find again at any time. An archetype is like an old water-course along which the water of life has flowed for centuries, digging a deep channel for itself. The longer it has flowed in this channel, the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return to its bed."(5)

The Nazi episode was ultimately an enormous set-back for the remanifestation of Woden. But the stream had not begun to flow with the Nazis and it did not end with them. By the late 1960s and early 1970s movements dedicated to the revival of the ancient Germanic religion in Iceland, Germany, England, and North America were in full swing.(6) In North America this movement is now being carried out by a number of organizations, including the Asatru Folk Assembly, the Asatru Alliance, and the Ring of Troth. Along with this, but largely independent of it, has come a runic revival, led in great measure by the efforts of the Rune Guild. Slowly and imperfectly some were beginning to feel their way back to the true roots of the mysteries of Woden.

It is clear that Woden is alive -- perhaps more so than any other ancient god. Furthermore, his unique character and the fact that he is/was the high god of the dominant ethnos in the world today make it very important for us to fathom his mysteries. The will to power and to self knowledge embodied in Woden must be recognized, understood, and directed -- for it will not be denied -- if the future is to hold out any promise for us.(7)

The Archetype of Woden

Many past attempts to pigeonhole Woden in the manner in which other traditional divinities can be treated have been unsatisfactory either because they ignored certain aspects, or because they did not seek deeply enough to the essential core of wholeness. This problem is understandable once the traditional sources are consulted in all their complexity.

In the mythology, the visions of Woden give us an initially perplexing image. He is seen in Valhalla -- as a beautiful youth and as a wise gray-beard atop his tower-gate, Hlidskjalf, gazing out over all the worlds. He is also seen as the ferry-man of the souls of the dead. While in visions of those in Midgard he is most often glimpsed as the leader of the wild and ghostly hunt, or as a simple landloper wearing a blue-black cloak, a broad brimmed hat, and carrying a staff or spear. This latter image is probably very ancient, as he shares many qualities with his closest Greco-Roman counterpart, Hermes-Mercury. Woden often appears as one of a member of a triad of gods when he is engaging in initiatory or creative activities. These triads all go back to a primeval three-aspected form of Woden, which would have appeared as Wodhanaz-Wiljon-Wihaz in Proto-Germanic, but which appears as Odhinn-Vili-Ve in Old Norse. Other triads are: Odhinn-Hoenir-Lodhurr, Odhinn-Hoenir-Loki, and Har ("the high one")-Jafnhar ("the equally high one")-and Thridhi ("the third one"). All of these represent threefold hypostases -- aspects or extensions -- of the god Woden.

The mythology shows Woden to be the highest god of the Germanic pantheon, the All-Father of the gods and humanity, the lord of battle, the god of the dead and the transference of the dead from this world to other realms, the lord of initiation and transformation, the god of shape-shifting, the patron of skalds (poets), the father of magic, the primeval rune-master, a great seer and visionary -- and ultimately an unpredictable deity when viewed from the limited perspective of humanity. It can be seen why, for many, the god defied classification. However, once focus is shifted to the human psyche as the realm in which the god truly at home, great possibilities for understanding open up.⁽⁸⁾ For us, the god's primary name indicates, and all of his characteristic actions show, that he is the god encompassing the internal and external struggles and quests of the human soul.

The many names of Woden open further doors of understanding. In one poem in the Poetic Edda called the "Grimnismal" (the Sayings of the Masked-One), the god reveals a whole catalog of over fifty names of himself. Over 120 such names have been counted throughout the tradition. The meanings of these names range from the "Worker of Evil" (Bolhverkr) to the "All-Father" (Alfodhr), from the "God of Cargoes" (Farmatyr) to the "Father of Victory" (Sigfodhr), from the "Wakeful" (Vakr) to the "Sleep-Maker" (Svafnir). His names show multiple dimensions in extreme bipolarity. Among the most revealing names are the ones such as "Changeable One" (Svipdal), the "Truth-Finder" (Sanngetal), and the "Hidden God" (Hroptatyr). The bewildering diversity of Woden's names coupled with the predominance of names having to do with things of the soul and hidden things, demonstrate in the warp and woof of their meanings that this is a god in

whom extremes and dualities are brought together -- synthesized -- in the secret confines of the human soul.

Richard Auld, using essentially Jungian tools of analysis, identifies this synthesizing characteristic as "the integrating bond linking the two opposing halves of the psyche"(9) - - e.g. the conscious and unconscious, but not limited to that. The Austrian scholar, Otto Hofler, had already identified two "basic forces" at work in the cult of Woden which he compared to the Nietzschean analysis of the Dionysian and Apollonian forces.(10) Today we might add the model of the right and left hemispheres of the brain to this understanding. The key to unlocking the mysteries of Woden is the realization that even at the very core, the Wodenic archetype is not simple -- but manifold. In its absolute simplest form it is a bipolar power -- emanating from a mysterious and unfathomable wholeness -- and returning to that wholeness again and again. It is eternally dynamic and eternally multifaceted. From this core of tripartite wholeness, the initially bewildering multiplicity of forms and functions of the god Woden come into focus. It is a wholeness of being that does not deny the many for the sake of the "one," nor does it forsake its integral wholeness for the sake of multiplicity. Woden is then, the god exemplifying the ability of the human psyche to synthesize and integrate the parts into a whole -- the objective as well as subjective realms.

Another key to the mystery of Woden is to be found in the various symbolic animal figures ascribed to him and which surround him in mythic iconography. He rides the eight-legged steed Sleipnir (Slipper), he is accompanied by his two wolves Geri (Glutton) and Freki (Greedy), he is attended and advised by his two ravens Huginn (Mind) and Muninn (Memory). He is also connected to eagle forms: one of his names is Arnhofdhi (Eagle-Head); and to the serpent: two of his names, Ofnir and Svavnir, may mean "snake." This array of zoomorphic symbols also points to the all-encompassing character of Woden, who is in the midst of these symbols -- the eagle is that of sovereign power, the ravens of the bipolar (cognitive/reflective) intellectual faculties, the wolves of the appetites for pleasure, and the snake of malevolent destruction (or defense). All of these possibilities of expression are constantly arrayed around the essentially threefold character of Woden -- which is at once integrative, transformational, and separative.(11)

In examining the complex activities of Woden in his mythology, Einar Haugen identifies three major areas of concern: death (by which the mysteries of magic and transformation can be understood), war, and sex "for fun."(12) But we can go beyond this to see that Woden's concerns are essentially fourfold: 1) wisdom and magic (which includes the central mysteries of death), 2) war and defense (in his warlike and royal aspects), 3) "management" (of the orderings of gods, humans, and nature), and 4) sex (both as All-Father, progenitor of demigods and human society, and as a purely fun activity). This latter aspect is so prevalent in the mythology and didactic poetry ascribed to Woden that it must be said to hold a preeminent place in the Wodenic mind-set. (Even a god can't spend all his time brooding over the fate of the cosmos high atop his tower-gate!)

ances of gods, the Aesir and Vanir. Thus the "blood of Kvasir," or the "poetic mead," is an essence of inspired synthesis itself. As such it rightly belongs to the gods of consciousness, the Aesir. However, at one point it was acquired by an etin (giant) named Suttung -- who has no real use for it but to hoard it. This is much like the serpents who hoard gold for which they have no use -- but they guard it obsessively. Woden's task then becomes to get the poetic mead to Asgard where it will be of use to gods and humans.

The process through which the liquid of inspired consciousness is rewon by Woden forms a pattern of graded initiation itself.

I. Woden/Odhinn, in the guise of Bolverkr (Evil-Worker), gains access to the mountain where the giants have hidden the mead. He does this by breaking an oath not to break into the mountain. Oath-breaking was among the worst evils possible in ancient Germanic society. Bolverkr teaches the higher law of Necessity, which is beyond good and evil.

II. In the form of a serpent, Woden bores his way into the interior of the mountain. For this he needs his serpentine form, which is capable of traversing the chthonic realm and of penetrating to the heart of darkness.

III. He emerges in the interior space of the mountain, where the mead is stored in three vats named Odhroerir (exciter of inspiration), Son (repayment), and Bodhn (container), all of which are guarded by the giantess Gunnlodh. There Woden spends three nights with the etin-wife. As a reward for his "good company," she allows him three sips of the poetic mead. But he drinks the entire contents of all three vats down in three great gulps. Here there is the familiar threefold essence of the mead. The sexual component involving Gunnlodh is also an indicator of the importance of sexuality at this stage of the initiatory process.

IV. After Woden has assimilated the poetic mead in its entirety, he transforms himself into an eagle and flies out the top of the mountain to Asgard where he spits the substance out -- again into three containers in order to preserve its threefold nature. The mead has now been removed from the realm of the giants, to that of the gods -- consciousness has been raised from a lower to a higher state of being.

In the paradigm of the myth of the rewinning of the poetic mead we see another essential initiatory pattern within the northern mysteries of Woden. In both the Yggdrasill rune-winning and in the rewinning of the poetic mead, there is the plunge into the depths of darkness -- wherein the mystery which is sought for is grasped -- whereupon there is a return from the darkness in which enlightenment has been gained.

The way of Woden is a timeless path. Those who follow it rightly do not look to the past as such for their models, but rather to those mythic paradigms preserved from bygone ages which are, in and of themselves, outside the measure of time. Taking into account what Jung and others have written about Woden, it might be said that he is, and has been for ages past, the true hidden god of the "west." It is indeed Woden who has loomed behind the Faustian spirit of the quest for sometimes forbidden sources of knowledge and

power. In many regards we are lucky to have so many of the technical aspects of the way of Woden still at our disposal. The myths contained in the Eddas and other sources, combined with traditional forms of runelore and runework, provide the keys to open once again the way of Woden within those who seek the mysteries of the integration of the soul over which he rules.

Notes:

1. Proto-Germanic is the grandparent language from which all other Germanic languages, e.g. German, English, Dutch, and the Scandinavian dialects are descended. It goes back several hundred years BCE.
2. This myth is recounted in the "Voluspa" (sts. 17-18) in the Poetic Edda and in ch. 9 of the Gylfaginning in the Prose Edda.
3. For a complete outline of the runic tradition on an esoteric basis, see Edred Thorsson's works Futhark, Runelore, and Runecaster's Handbook, all published by Samuel Weiser (York Beach, ME: 1984, 1986, and 1988 respectively).
4. For a historical discussion of this movement, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The occult Roots of Nazism* (Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian, 1985) and Stephen Flowers' translation and introduction of Guido von List's *The Secret of the Runes* (Rochester, VT: Destiny, 1988).
5. C. G. Jung, "Wotan" in: *Collected Works*, vol. 10. Translated by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960-1969), p. 189.
6. See Stephen Flowers "Revival of Germanic Religion in Contemporary Anglo-American Culture." *Mankind Quarterly*, 21:3 (Spring, 1981). pp. 279-294.
7. For a contemporary perspective on the archetype of Wotan, see Ean Begg, *Myth and Today's Conciousness* (London: Coventure, 1984), pp. 97-106.
8. Another writer taking this perspective is Richard Auld, "The Psychological and Mythic Unity of the God, Odhinn." *Numen*, 23:2 (1976), pp. 145-160.
9. Auld, p. 147.
10. Otto Hofler, "Zwei Grundkrafte im Wodankult," pp. 133-144.
11. Thorsson, *Runelore*, pp. 196-197.

12. Einar Haugen, "The Edda as Ritual: Odin and His Masks," in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. R. J. Glendinning, et al. (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), p.16.