

Disir

“Woman is also referred to in terms of all asyniur or valkyries or norms or *disir*. It is also normal to refer to woman by any of her activities or by her possession or descent.”

- *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson¹

The pre-Christian religious traditions of Scandinavia are often as intriguing as they are ambiguous.² This is especially true in relation to a group of female deities known as the *Dísir*. Much of the ambiguity which surrounds the *Dísir* may stem from descriptions of them that give them traits and abilities which are understood to belong to other groups of beings such as the Norns or Valkyries. This has led to a variety of scholarly perspectives regarding the *Dísir*, who they were and how their practitioners may have related to them. These perspectives vary widely from understanding the *Dísir* as simply a collection of household goddesses, which were worshipped in a private household setting, to a group of powerful goddesses who were equal to, if not more powerful than, their male counterparts. Regardless of the evidence put forward to support these perspectives, it must be remembered we do not have direct access to the beliefs and practices of those who worshipped these deities. While the practitioners themselves are lost to us, we do have access to various materials, both literary and otherwise, that can be used as sources for understanding these people.³ Through critical and comparative analysis of the various sources available, we may be able to learn something about the religious beliefs and practices regarding the *Dísir*.⁴ It has often been put forward by scholars such as John Kousgard Sorensen and Jonas Gislason, that the much of ambiguity surrounding the Scandinavian pre-Christian religion, including the cultic practices surrounding the *Dísir*, are a result, directly or indirectly, of the effort to Christianization. While this thesis is both relevant and supportable given the sources available, it may also stem from a specific understanding of religion which may mask or omit forms of religious understanding that are not influenced by a Christian theological concerns, or at least from an understanding of religion as ‘open’.⁵ However, if the *Dísir* and the cultic practices

¹ This quote is from page 94. See works cited for full citation.

² Two things must be noted at the beginning of this paper. First, the use of the Christian/pre-Christian dichotomy is used solely as a heuristic construction. It has been argued by scholars, such as Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad, that the historical interaction between Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian peoples resulted, over time, in an assimilation of culture rather than outright replacement as the term itself may imply. Secondly, the use of the plural here in regards to pre-Christian religious traditions is done intentionally. Given our limited knowledge of the nature of pre-Christian religious tradition, it is quite possible that there were a myriad of different forms of pre-Christian religion that while unified to some extent, were far more distinctive from one another than the Christian sources allude.

³ This paper will deal primarily with literary sources. However, Else Mundal’s comment referring to the limitations of literary sources should be kept in mind. She states, “It is of course possible that the gods and goddesses may have been popular in the myths without being important in the cult. The multitude of female divinities, above all, and some of the gods who are known only as peripheral myth figures, are suspected of belonging to myth literature only” (Mundal 300).

⁴ This statement is partially influenced by Mundal in the work cited. She argues that the sources which we have referring to the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia must be seen analyzed critically both separately and together. For her argument, see work cited, specifically page 295.

⁵ I use the term ‘open’ to refer to traditions that hold a specific understanding of sacred knowledge regarding its place in the tradition and who has access to it. ‘Open’ religions emphasize knowledge of the religious system and its components, whether understood theologically or otherwise, over the experience. Furthermore, this sacred knowledge is in many ways considered to be in the public domain and, whether one is a practitioner of that tradition

which surround them are seen as belonging to a type of religious practice which places emphasis not a firm rational or theological understanding of faith but on experience and personal interaction between the practitioners and their deities, then the ambiguous nature of the *Dísir* may be allowed to stand not as sole result of a historical development but rather as nature of the *Dísir* themselves.

In order to support the thesis offered above, this paper will be broken down into two parts. The first part will be a brief exploration of how the *Dísir* have been viewed by a variety of scholars. The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with some access to the ways in which scholarship has seen the *Dísir* and the conclusions that have been drawn about them. However, it should be noted that there will be no attempt made to bring together or somehow assimilate these various understandings of the *Dísir* which arise from scholarship. For the purposes of this paper, the ambiguous nature of the *Dísir* will be presented as a given, whether it is seen as solely arising from historical development or otherwise. The second part of this paper will focus on how viewing the *Dísir* as part of a mystical tradition may benefit scholars when trying to understand how they appear in various sources. This portion of the paper will also include a brief discussion on the assumptions placed upon religion when viewed from an ‘open’ understanding of religious practice.

Before moving directly into looking at the ways in which scholasticism has understood the *Dísir*, it may be beneficial to offer a brief statement on the etymology of the term ‘*Dísir*’ itself. Oftentimes the meaning of the term offered by various authors is just as ambiguous as the traits offered for the *Dísir* themselves. According to Thomas A. DuBois, the term *Dísir* means ‘female household spirit’ (DuBois 51). John Lindow translates the term as ‘Collective Female Spirits’ (Lindow 95). Sawyer translates the term simply as ‘goddesses’ but offers that the singular form ‘*dies*’ is used to refer to ‘woman’ (Sawyer 196). While the ambiguity of the term itself will be allowed to stand, it should be noted that the translation that a specific author gives of the term ‘*Dísir*’ seems to correspond directly to the perspective which a specific scholar gives to the ‘*Dísir*.’ Interestingly, it seems that to illuminate the ambiguity of the *Dísir* themselves, scholars must also illuminate any ambiguity in the term itself.

As mentioned above, DuBois suggests that the term ‘*Dísir*’ refers to a group of goddesses whose domain is that of the home and specifically within the religious traditions of women. He suggests that sacrifices to *Dísir*, which took place at fall and midwinter, were conducted within the home and that to invade to home during these ceremonies had dire consequences. DuBois argues that this form of worship may have its roots in ancestral worship and that the worship itself may have been characterized “by clear delimitations of duty and normalized reciprocity-based sacrifices” (DuBois 51). DuBois’s understanding of the *Dísir* is rooted in comparison of them with that of household deities of a neighboring culture, the Sami.⁶ DuBois argues that the various Sami deities of the household “evince many of the characteristics typical of such household spirits and may serve as indicators of the cosmological significance and roles of these beings amongst Nordic peoples in general” (DuBois 51). As such, each of the *Dísir* may have

or not, it can be accessed without initiation into the cult. It is my contention that the Christian which existed within Scandinavia, at least during the time of the various conversions, was such a religion. However, I realize that my knowledge of this period is based upon limited information and that this understanding may be limited because it is the perspective offered by elites rather than everyday practitioners. Regardless, it appears that the perspective of religion offered by the scholars which address this material are oftentimes influenced more by an understanding of religion as ‘open’ than by an understanding of religion as it is seen by practitioners of ‘mystical’ traditions.

⁶ DuBois is not the only scholar to suggest a link between or a comparison of Sami deities and the *Dísir*. Hilda Ellis Davidson suggest this also in her work, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, see page 146.

had specific roles within the household and specific places in which they resided, although there may be some differences due to locality (DuBois 51). While DuBois says little of the specific abilities of the Dísir, he does suggest that they, just like their Sami counterparts, had a special role in childbirth (DuBois 112). However, he makes little attempt to discuss the Dísir within the specific confines of these traditions in which they may have been an integral part.⁷

The presentation which John Lindow gives of the sacrifices to the Dísir is in striking contrast to DuBois. While Lindow's work is mainly a dictionary of all things Norse, it does include an entry on both the Dísir and their sacrifice, which he calls a 'dísablót.' He states: "Thus the dísablót appears to have had a connection with autumn and to have been a rather public event, insofar as it involved participation of royalty" (Lindow 95). Regardless of their public role, Lindow argues that we know little, if anything, of either the Dísir themselves or of their festival (Lindow 95). Part of the reason for this is that, for Lindow, there appears to be a certain amount of overlap between the Dísir and other feminine groupings. For instance, he suggests that the Dísir may be compared to, or confused with, Valkyries because the literary sources describe both in much the same manner. Part of this has to do with the fact that many times they seem to be associated with death. "These Dísir who would choose a doomed warrior and invite him into their benches look rather like valkyries, the choosers of the dead and the maidens who serve them in Valhöll" (Lindow 95).⁸ Furthermore, the Dísir may also include specific goddesses, such as Freyja and Skaldi which are referred to singularly as 'dís' and 'dís of the vanir' (Lindow 95). This blurring of feminine groupings seems to cause difficulty for Lindow, although he doesn't directly mention it. It is also unclear as to whether this difficulty arises because the inclusion of goddesses, such as Skaldi and Freyja, call into question how he defines Dísir ('collective female spirits') or whether the fact that these two goddesses are specifically singled out of a group of deities which by their nature are supposed to be undifferentiated.

Interestingly, there are some scholars which argue that the Dísir have both public and private functions and that this seems to allow them to interact with their practitioners in more than one sphere. This may suggest their level of importance. For instance, Hilda Ellis Davidson seems to draw a connection between localization of specific deities or groups and their connection with the power structure which resides there. "It is generally assumed that the Dísir were family guardian spirits, closely associated with particular localities, to whom sacrifices were made for luck and fertility of the land and those owning it, and thus at the highest level connected with the royal dynasty" (Davidson 113). The ability to allow the Dísir to move between these two spheres may result in the fact that Davidson regards the Dísir as "another word for female deities generally used in the plural..." (Davidson 113). However, as possibly alluded to in the above statement, she sees an association between the Dísir, luck and fertility. It seems that for Davidson, this role, which is also associated with the Norns, causes difficulty

⁷ It should be noted that I find the DuBois discussion limited by his emphasis on the comparison to the Sami. It seems to me that he is making the Sami tradition the normative one for the Scandinavian region and I have my doubts as to whether this will hold up under the scrutiny of a researcher more versed in Scandinavian traditions than I.

⁸ While Lindow points to the possibility of a link between the Dísir and the Valkyries and finds this difficult, I believe that there may be an explanation which would give rise to an understanding of the Dísir which would be less problematic. For instance, since Odin and Freya are paired up in regards to those that die in battle, Odin getting one half and Freya getting the other, it seems possible that the Dísir, whether in part or as a whole, play a similar role to the Valkyries in regards to their service under Freya. In other words, Odin's servant are the Valkyries and Freya's are the Dísir. See Lindow 127 for reference to Freya and the dead.

when trying to understand how both may have the same function in Scandinavian traditions (Davidson 118).

From the necessarily brief discussion offered above, it should be clear that there is a great deal of inconsistency within the scholastic understandings of the *Dísir*. It is unclear as to whether they were worshiped in either the public or private sphere or both. The roles that they played with regards to the life of the religious practitioners are also open to question regardless of whether they are responsible for luck, fertility or child birth. While it may be important to address the inconsistent ways in which these scholars may portray the *Dísir* and their role in the lives of the practitioner, the possibility must be entertained that the ambiguity itself may not be the result of faulty scholastic enquiry.

A possible reason for the ambiguity which surrounds the *Dísir* and causes general difficulty in understanding pre-Christian religious practice put forth by scholars is the result of the historical interaction between Christianity and those traditions with which it was competing for adherents. Sorensen argues that the literature and histories that we have access to were part of the Christian propaganda machine and, as such, they were never meant to be accurate portrayals of life or specific events (Sorensen 395). As such, historians could omit, fabricate and otherwise distort the information they offered to their readers according whatever agendas they held. If the historian happened to be a Christian theologian, his interests may not have necessarily included a need to focus on a fair-minded portrayal of non-Christian traditions. Gislason shares these concerns:

Information about heathen beliefs in the tenth century is extremely scarce; and, of course, most of the sources for these beliefs were written down by Christians and at a later date, or they were written by men who were under string Christian influence... The main emphasis was doubtless placed on assuring the people that Christ was more powerful than all the other gods; Christ the victorious was taught the victory who had destroyed the power of evil” (Gislason 228-229).

This concern, and the perspective on the information that arises from it, is a valid one. It calls for the scholar to be aware and critically analyze the descriptions offered by the literary sources that are available.

However, this perspective might also hinder the scholar who is trying to understand the religious practices surrounding the *Dísir* specifically and perhaps, pre-Christian religion in general. This seems to be especially true if the scholar is under the assumption that if the Nordic region never came into contact with Christianity then scholars of today would be able to have direct access to its religious practices.⁹ For instance, if the scholar works under the assumption that the ambiguity regarding the *Dísir* stems solely from an interaction with Christianity, then she may not allow for the possibility that the ambiguity played a central role in the pre-Christian religion itself.

One way to allow for the ambiguity to exist within the pre-Christian religions of Scandinavia is to work from the assumption that such traditions were more akin to mystical traditions rather than ‘open’ traditions. For the purposes of this paper, a mystical tradition will be defined as a religious tradition that places an emphasis upon religious experience rather than

⁹ While this seems to be an extreme perspective, I have often seen it from feminist scholarship that see Nordic traditions, or world religion in general, as fundamentally open and unambiguous before the rise of Christianity and its ‘negative’ influence.

rational or theological forms of sacred knowledge and may not see such knowledge as universal or open to all who are uninitiated.¹⁰

Such a shift in perspective may have broad impact when scholars try to understand the Scandinavian tradition as a whole. Support for this different perspective allowing for ambiguity to stand is offered by Mundal. When discussing whether or not the power between the gods and goddesses within pre-Christian traditions were equal or whether Snorri Sturgeson depicted them as such due to his political agenda, she states: “I can hardly see why Snorri should give a description in defiance of his sources, and the reason why the descriptions of the goddesses seems to be self-contradictory on this point may in my opinion be that the conceptions really were incoherent... (Mundal 304).¹¹

While choosing the perspective of viewing the pre-Christian religious practices as a mystical tradition as a whole, it also offers some interesting insights when specifically looking at the *Dísir*.¹² For instance, if the cult surrounding the *Dísir* is seen as the result of a mystical interaction, then it stands to reason that the ambiguity may be inherent within the interaction itself rather than as a result of poor scholarship or politically motivated notation. This would allow the scholar today to see the interaction between the *Dísir* and the practitioner as one which is both open ended, intensely personal, and possibly even dangerous. The focus here would be to develop a relationship and understanding between the individual practitioner, or her close knit community and the *Dísir* rather than to create a theological understanding that may be universally applied.¹³ Such an understanding may allow the *Dísir* to be extremely important in cultic activities but not to have a wide presence within literary works or other sources. Mundal seems to support this viewpoint on omission when talking of theophoric personal names. “If a god’s name is frequently used as a component in first names, it is surely evidence of popularity, but if a god’s name is not used, it is not necessarily evidence of the opposite” (Mundal 299).

It is also important to note that if the pre-Christian Scandinavian tradition is seen as one in which a person must be initiated into the cult in order to have access to the sacred knowledge, writings regarding such traditions, whether or not they come from Christian authors, would be inherently lacking in both detail and certainty. There does seem to be some reason to believe that, in part, cultic activities surrounding the *Dísir* were done in secrecy at least at the local level. In DuBois’s depiction of the *Dísir*, he offers an example from *Njáls Saga* of a man opening the

¹⁰ It might be argued that this definition is contrived to the extent that the following dichotomy arises; open/Christian tradition – mystical/pre-Christian tradition. This is actually correct and is done with the purpose in mind of calling into question whether current scholastic methodology is too limited when regarding the *Dísir* and pre-Christian religious traditions.

¹¹ It should be noted that Mundal has a specific agenda of her own in arguing that the incoherency was the result of a change from a belief system which did not essentially delegate power hierarchal to which was patriarchal in nature. While I have some reservations about some of her conclusions, the fact remains that she seems to be open to allowing the incoherency to be part of the pre-Christian religion itself rather than as merely the result of Christian influences.

¹² Due to space concerns, the ramifications that may stem from understanding pre-Christian religious traditions as mystical traditions in general will not be offered. However, it stands to reason that when Christianity and pre-Christian Scandinavian traditions came into contact, it was not simply a matter of clashing godheads but of fundamentally different metaphysical systems. Oftentimes in literature dealing with polytheistic and monotheistic traditions I find that the understanding of polytheism is sadly lacking and that it is often described merely as ‘monotheism with more than one godhead’.

¹³ There is scholarly debate surrounding the place of the individual within pre-Christian Scandinavian traditions. It seems to me that there needs to be equal consideration of both person and communal forms of piety. In over abundant focus on one over the other may result in an unnecessary skewing of the traditions themselves. For a more developed exploration of this issue see, Ake V. Strom’s “Personal Piety in Nordic Heathenism.”

door to a home, which appears to be taboo during a Dísablót and the man is killed by the Dísir themselves (DuBois 51). Crossing the threshold, or simply opening the door may be interpreted as a person trying to gain access or allowing access to sacred knowledge, i.e. the actual happenings of the dísablót ritual, to which those who should not have access to it.¹⁴

Another insight that may become apparent is that the literary sources themselves have more to offer when the Dísir are allowed to stand ambiguously in regards to their actions. For instance, in *The Lay of Sigrdrifa*, Sigurd is told:

‘Helping runes you must know if you want to assist
And release children from women;
They shall be cut on your palms and clasped on the joints,
And then the disir asked for help’ (Stanza 9).¹⁵

Here the Dísir are seen as helpful to those giving or helping in birth. In contrast, in *Ynglinga Saga* 29 the Dísir are seen as taking life, rather than offering it. “King Adila was at a sacrifice to the goddesses [Dísir] and rode on his horse around the temple; the horse stumbled under him and fell; ... his head fell against against a stone , so that his brain burst and his brains lay on the stone” (Monsen 22).¹⁶ These two depictions of the Dísir seem to contradict one another both in issues of offering and taking death, and in presenting the Disir as both benevolent and maleficent toward humanity.¹⁷ However, with the perspective that the Dísir are ambiguous in their relationship to humanity, both of these depictions are allowed to stand and the scholar need not ask which one is correct but rather how are these descriptions are related.

The final insight that may be addressed here regards the categories, such Dísir, Valkyries, and Norns, etc., which are put forward by the sources. One may expect that when the pre-Christian religious tradition is seen as an ‘open’ system that sacred knowledge about the Dísir and other groups would be straight forward and non-overlapping. However, as shown above this is simply not the case. However, when viewed as resulting from a mystical tradition, these categories are allowed to be both more fluid in the boundaries and perhaps understood differently. Rather than the term Dísir being used to refer to a being which adheres to this category based upon their abilities, such as the ability to ease birth or bring death, they are categorized by the type of interaction that they have with the religious practitioner. It would be interesting to explore the term ‘Dísir’ itself and see if the reference to femininity doesn’t necessarily refer to the gender of the deity being discussed, but rather points to the nature of the deity or the way in which they relate to practitioners. A case may be made which supports the perspective that the gods or pre-Christian Scandinavian tradition are seen in unambiguous terms

¹⁴ Sadly this interpretation stems only from the paraphrase that DuBois offers. I do not have access to this work and must simply assume that what is happening in the text is correctly described by Dubois.

¹⁵ See Larrington’s translation in works cited for full reference.

¹⁶ The reading that the goddesses within this stanza are the Dísir is suggested by Hilda Ellis Davidson in her work *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, page 47. I suggest here that the Dísir are responsible for the taking of the king’s life either by direct action or by neglect. However, a valid argument may be made that I am reading too much into this stanza and that it is simply a telling of the death of King rather than an account of Dísir’s acting negatively toward humans. However, Lindow quotes *Ynglinga tal* which seems to suggest that a witch or ‘creature of magic’ may be responsible for the king’s death. I see no reason why this creature could not simply be one of the Dísir. For Lindow’s description see page 94 of the work cited.

¹⁷ I believe here that the real issue is not that the Dísir are connected to both life and death, much in the same way that the Norns are but rather that the relationship between the Dísir and their practitioners may have been ambiguous in terms of interaction. If the ambiguity is to be done away with then the question must be asked as to whether the Dísir are by their nature beneficial or malevolent. I’m not sure if one of these traits can be chosen over the other.

and that the foundation of their power lies in the certainty that the practitioner has of how the god is going to act relative to practitioner. On the other hand, the goddess, which is often referred to more fluidly within the literary sources, may gain their power from such a 'mysterious' foundation.¹⁸ As such, those deities which are not strongly defined by sacred knowledge may be considered feminine regardless of their gender. Perhaps, this is the case for the group known as the Dísir.

These insights show that it is important for scholarship to step outside the usual view of religious practices as they have been presented solely based upon understandings of 'open' religious systems. Such a shift in perspective may allow scholars to solve old difficulties and ask new questions. However, it needs to be reiterated that it would be far more beneficial for scholastics to consider viewing the ambiguity of the Dísir as resulting both from the historical influence of Christianity upon Scandinavian belief and to keep open the possibility that the ambiguity existed within the Scandinavian religious traditions before contact within Christianity.

¹⁸ Due to the space limitations of this paper there can be little support offered for the claims made regarding the type of information regarding the gods as unambiguous and the goddesses as ambiguous. However, from the lectures offered by Dr. Tracey Sands in Old Norse Mythology, Spring 2006 it is clear that the information offered regarding the gods is often more concretely discussed and less ambiguous than that referring to the goddesses.

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