

# SACRIFICES TO THE ALFAR, DISIR, FYLGJA, HAMINGJA, AND LANDVÆTTIR. CHAPTER XXVII

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Sacrifices to the Alfar -- Early worship of the Alfar -- Spirits of the Alfar -  
Sacrifices to the Disir -- Ceremonies attending the sacrifices -- The Fylgja and  
Hamingja or following and family spirits -- They take various shapes -They  
appear in dreams -- Guardian spirits of the land.

THE people made sacrifices to the Alfar (*Alfa-blót*) mentioned in the earlier Edda, as well as to the Asar and Disir, who we have seen were closely related to the former. <sup>1</sup> These sacrifices, of which there are few accounts, and which seem to have been made in houses, are perhaps traces of a religion previous to that of Odin of the North.

King Olaf Haraldsson sent as messengers to Olaf, King of Sweden, Björn, his marshal, and the Icelandic scald Sigvat. After leaving Norway they went across the Eidaforest.

"Then they went through Gautland, and one evening came to a farm called Hof. The door was shut and they could not enter; the husband and wife said it was holy there, and they went away. Then they came to another farm; the housewife stood at the door and asked them not to go in, saying they were holding *Alfa-blót*. Sigvat sang: --

DO not go farther in, Wretched man;

I fear the wrath of Odin, We are heathens.

(St. Olaf's Saga, c. 92.)

We have seen that the Alfar, from whom some people claimed their descent, as others did from the Asar, were of two kinds, and dwelt at Alfheim, not far from the Urd well by the ash Yggdrasil. They made the fetter *Gleipnir*, with which the Fenris-wolf was kept tied; also the ship *Skidbladnir*, Odin's spear *Gungnir*, and Sif's golden hair, &c.

"Why is gold called the hair of Sif? ' Loki, son of Lanfey, had, through cunning, cut off all the hair of Sif (wife of Thor). When Thor knew it he took Loki and would have crushed every bone in him if he had not sworn to get the Svartalfar (black Altar) to make hair of gold for Sif which would grow like other hair. Thereafter Loki went to the Dvergar, called the sons of Ivaldi, <sup>2</sup> and they made the hair and *Skidbladnir* and the spear of Odin, *Gungnir*. Then Loki staked his head to the Dverg Brok that his brother Sindri would not be able to make three things as good as these. When they came to the smithy, Sindri laid the skin of a swine on the hearth and asked Brok to blow (the bellows), and not to stop before he had taken from the hearth what he had put on it. When he had left the forge and Brok had made the bellows blow, a fly <sup>3</sup> sat down on his hand and pecked at it; he continued until the smith took from the hearth a boar with golden bristles. Then Sindri put gold on the hearth and asked him to blow and not to stop till he came back. He went, and the fly

came and sat down on his neck and pecked twice as hard, but he blew until the smith took from the hearth a gold ring called *Draupnir*. Then Sindri laid iron on the hearth and asked him to blow, as this would be of no use if he stopped it. Then the fly settled down between his eyes and pecked at his eyelids. When the blood ran down into his eyes so that he saw nothing he swept away the fly as quickly as he could, and the bellows fell down; then the smith came and said that now all that was on the hearth had been made nearly useless. He took a hammer from it and gave all these (three) things to his brother Brok, and asked him to take them to Asgard for the wager. . . . Loki gave to Odin the spear *Gungnir*, to Thor the hair for Sif, to Frey *Skidbladnir*. . . . Then Brok gave the ring (*Draupnir*) to Odin, and said that every ninth night eight rings equally heavy would drop from it; he gave the boar to Frey, and said it could run over sea and air by night and day faster than any horse, and that the night or *mirkheimar* (the black world) would never get so dark but there would be enough light from the shining of its mane. He gave the hammer to Thor, and said that whatever he met, however large the object was, he might strike it with the hammer and it would never fail; if he threw it at anything it would never miss, and never go so far as not to come back into his hand' " (Skáldskaparmál, 35).

" Ragnar (the son of Sigurd Hring) grew up in his father's laird; he was taller and handsomer than any man people had seen, and like his mother and her kin to look at, for it is known from all old sayings about the people that are called Alfar that they were much finer than other kinds of men in the northern lands. The parents of his mother Alfhild and all her kin sprung from Alf the old " (Sögubrot, c. 10).

"The land which King Álf ruled was called Alfheim, and all the people that spring from him are of the Alfa-kin; next after the Risar they were finer than other people. King Alf was married to Bryngerd, daughter of King Raum, in Raumariki; she was tall but not handsome, for Raum was ugly; <sup>4</sup> the men who are tall and ugly are called *raumar*" ( Thorstein's Saga Vikingssonar, c. 1).

The people thought that the spirits of the Alfar sometimes lived not far from human habitations.

Kormak and Thorvard had fought, and the latter had been wounded; he recovered slowly, and as soon as he could get on his feet went to find Thordis (a Volva), and inquired how he could best recover his health. He replied: --

"A short distance from here there is a hill, in which Alfar live. Thou must get the bull, which Kormak killed, and with its blood redden the outside of the hill, and make a feast for the Alfar of the meat, and thou wilt recover" ( Kormak's Saga, c. 22).

*Disa-blót*. -- The sacrifices offered to the Disir, or genii who specially guarded men and families and appeared when important events happened, <sup>5</sup> seem to have been performed by women only, and to have been usually made in the autumn or winter nights; sometimes human sacrifices were made to them.

This worship from its very nature was probably of great antiquity, and belonged to the religion practised by the Asar.

The earliest account of a *Disa-blót* is in *Hervarar Saga*.

"A man named Arngrim was a Risi and mountain dweller, who took Ama Ymi's daughter from Ymisland, and married her; their son was Hergrim, called *half-Tröll*. He was sometimes with the mountain Risar, and sometimes with men; he had the strength of a Jötun; was much skilled in witchcraft and a great Berserk; <sup>6</sup> he carried off Ogn Alfasprengi from Jötunheim and married her; they had a son called Grim. Starkad then lived at Öfossar; he was by kin a Thurs, and like them in strength and nature; his father was Störkvid. Ogn Alfasprengi was betrothed to Starkad, but Hergrim took her from him while he was travelling north over Elivágar; when he came back he asked him to give him back his wife, and at the same time challenged him to 'holmanga.' <sup>7</sup> They fought at the uppermost waterfall at Eydi.' Starkad had eight hands, and fought with four swords at once. He won the victory, and Hergrim fell. Ogn was looking on, and when Hergrim had fallen she stabbed herself and would not marry Starkad. Starkad took all the property of Hergrim with him, and also his son Grim, who grew up with him, and was both tall and strong. King Alf, who ruled in Alfheimar, had a daughter Alfhild. At that time the land between Gautelf and Raumelf was called Alfheimar. One autumn there was a great *disablót* (sacrifice to the Disir) <sup>8</sup> at King Alf's, and Alfhild went to it; she was more beautiful than any other woman, and all the people in Alfheimar were handsomer than other people at that time; but in the night, as she was reddening the hörg with blood, Starkad Aludreng took her away to his home. Then King Alf invoked Thor to seek for Alfhild, and Thor killed Starkad, and made Alfhild go home to her father, and Grim the son of Hergrim with her. When Grim was twelve winters old he went into warfare and became one of the greatest warriors; He married Bauggerd, the daughter of Alfhild and Starkad. He settled on an island in Halogaland called Bólm, and was therefrom called Eygrim Bólm; their son was Arngrim Berserk, who afterwards lived in Bólm, and was a most famous warrior" (Hervarar Saga, c. 1).

" KingEirik Bloodaxe and Gunnhild came the same evening to Atli, where Bard had prepared a great feast for him, and there was to be a *disablót*. There was much drinking and feasting in the hall. The king asked where Bard was, for he saw him nowhere. A man replied: 'Bard is outside helping his guests.' 'Who are those cruests,' inquired the king, 'that he thinks it more his duty to be there than inside with us?' The man told him they were the huslcarlar (servants) of Thorir hersir. The king added: 'Go to them as speedily as possible, and call them in here.' When they came, the king received Olvir well, and made him sit opposite him in the high-seat, and his men on both sides of him. Egil was next to Olvir; then ale was brought in, and many memorial toasts were drunk, a horn to be emptied at each. As the evening was drawing to a close many of Olvir's men became drunk; some of them vomited in the hall, but others went outside" ( Egil's Saga, c. 44).

Even at Upsala sacrifices were offered to the Disir.

" KingAdils was at a *disablót*, and rode on a horse round the disarsal (hall of the Disir); his horse stumbled and fell, and the king was thrown off, and his head hit a stone so that it broke and his brains lay on the stone. This caused his death. He died at Uppsalir, and is mound-laid. there; the Swedes called him a powerful king" (Ynglinga Saga, c. 33).

Among the Disir two women, who are mentioned several times in the Sagas, seem to have been regarded as special objects of worship. These are the sisters Thorgerd Hörgabrud, or Hölgabrud, and Yrpa. The name of Hörgabrud signifies the bride of the altars, and indicates her supposed holiness; and the second name, Hölgabrud, undoubtedly shows that she has been especially worshipped in Hálogaland, whence the family of the great Hakon Jarl hailed;

thus Thorgerd and her sister came to be the special guardians of that family (see Human Sacrifice, page 367).

"A. king called Hölgj, after whom Hálogaland is named, is said to have been the father of Thorgerd Hölgabrud. To both of them sacrifices were made, and a mound was raised for Hölgj; one layer was of gold and silver, which were offerings, and another was of earth and stones" (Later Edda (Skáldskaparmál), c. 45).

The Disir are often spoken of as Fylgja (following spirit), and Hamingja (good luck or family spirit); but there must have been some distinction between them and the Disir proper, as no sacrifices were offered to the Hamingja and Fylgja. <sup>9</sup> The latter seem to be synonymous, but the former spirit, which at the hour of death left the dying person and passed to a dear son, was the more personal, and it was believed that it could be transmitted from one man to another.

The expressions *kynfylgja* (kinguardians), *attaifylgja* (family guardians), which sometimes occur in the Sagas, seem to indicate a belief that the eminent qualities of a family were protected by these spirits.

King Volsung married his daughter Signy to King Siggeir. When Siggeir departed --

" Signy said to her father: 'I do not want to go with Siggeir, and my mind does not feel love towards him, and I know by my foresight, and from our kynfylgja, that this marriage will cause much sorrow to us if it is not soon broken off" (Volsunga Saga, c. 4).

Sometimes the guardian spirit of one man would follow another. Thorstein went to find the Dverg Sindri, and gave him good gifts, and they separated with the greatest friendship. The Dverg said --

"[Now must we separate for some time, and fare thee well. I tell thee that my Disir will constantly follow thee. Thereupon Thorstein went to his boat and rowed to his men ( Thorstein Vikingsson, ch. xxii.).

"At the time when Olaf came to Gardariki there were many men in Hólmgard who foretold future things; they all could tell by their wisdom that the *fylgjas* of a young foreigner had come into the country, and that these were so luckylooking that never had they seen the fylgjas of any man like them; but they knew not who or whence he was; nevertheless they showed with many words that the bright light shining over him would spread all over Gardariki and widely through the eastern half of the world" (Fornmanna Sögur, I. c. 57).

" Glum dreamed one night that he was standing outside his farm, and looking over the fjord, and that he saw a woman going up the district from the sea, and walking towards Thverá (the farm of Glum). She was so large that her shoulders touched the mountains on both sides of the valley; he went from the house to meet her, and invited her to him, and then he awoke. All thought it marvellous, but he said: 'The dream is great and remarkable; but thus will I interpret it: that my mother's father Vigfus must be dead, and that woman who was taller than the mountains is probably his hamingja, for he surpassed others in most things of honour, and his luck will dwell where I am.' Next summer, when ships arrived from Norway, the death of Vigfus was heard of (Viga Glum, c. 9).

The shapes of the various *Fylgjas* can best be found from the forms in which the people thought they perceived them. They were inherited from one man by his descendants and even relatives, so that some families had their permanent guardianship; to them accordingly was often ascribed the success of some individuals.

The shapes most frequently assumed were those of birds and animals, and in some such shape every man was supposed to have his *fylgja*, indicative of his character; cunning people were said to have foxes for their *fylgja*; fierce warriors, wolves; great, chiefs, eagles, oxen, bears, and other animals. <sup>10</sup> From numerous Sagas we find that they frequently assumed the shape of bears, which went in front of the persons they wanted to guard, and sometimes presented themselves in the form of the human being whose genii they were, but *never* in the *shape of women* <sup>11</sup> like the Disir proper. Those of the deceased were believed to warn their relatives, kinsmen, and friends, and appeared at or before important events in the life of the person whom they guarded, sometimes while he was awake, but as a rule in dreams, and it was believed that a sudden sleepiness foreboded their coming. Wherever those under their protection went they accompanied them, preceding them to such places as they intended to visit.

When Halfred while on a voyage to Iceland fell sick --

A woman was seen to walk along the ship; she was large and had on a coat of mail, and walked on the waves as if on land. Halfred looked and saw that it was his female guardian (*fylgja-kona*), and said: "I declare myself altogether sundered from thee." She asked, 'Wilt thou, Thorvald, receive me?' He replied he would not. Then Halfred the young (a son of the poet Halfred) said, 'I will receive thee;' she then vanished. Then Halfred said: 'I will give to thee, my son, the sword of the king, but the other things shall be laid in my coffin if I die on board the ship.' He sang ('God rules; I fear hell; every man must die'). A little after he died, and was laid in a coffin with his things, a cloak, a helmet, and a ring, and then thrown overboard" ( *Halfredar Saga*, c. 11).

The chief Hall of Sida had a feast. In the night Thidrandi his son heard some one knocking repeatedly at the door, and went out with a sword in his hand.

"He heard the sound of horses' feet from the north, and saw nine *women* <sup>12</sup> riding in black clothes with drawn swords in their hands. He also heard horse-feet from the south, and saw nine women all in white clothes on white horses. He wanted to go in and tell this vision to people, but the black-dressed women were quicker and attacked him, while he defended himself valiantly.

"A long while after Thórhall (one of the guests) awoke and asked if Thidrandi was awake, and got no answer. He said it was too late. They went out. The moon shone and the weather was frosty. They found Thidrandi lying wounded" (*Fornmanna Sögur*).

"One summer King Ivar Vidfadmi went with his host west from Sweden to Reidgotaland, and landed in Selund. He sent word to his son-in-law Hrørek to come to him; he told this to Aud his wife, who asked if he intended to go to meet his kinsman and invite him to a feast on shore. In the evening, when King Hrorek retired, Aud had prepared a new bed with all the clothes in it new, and placed it on the middle of the floor; she requested him to sleep therein, to remember what he dreamt, and tell it her in the morning; and she made herself another bed. In the morning, when asked about his dream, 'I dreamt,' he said, 'that I was standing near a forest, beside a fine level field, and there saw a stag. Then a wild beast, with a mane like gold, ran out of the forest; the stag thrust its horns under the shoulder of the beast, and it fell

dead. There upon I saw a large dragon fly to where the stag was, at once seize it in its claws, and tear it asunder. Then I saw a shebear with her cub, which the dragon wanted to take, but the bear defended it; and then I awoke.' She answered: 'This is a remarkable dream; and beware thou of King Ivar, my father, that he, does not deceive thee when thou meetest him, for thou hast seen kings' fylgjas, and there will be fights with them, and it will be well if this stag is not thy own fylgja, which seems most likely to me" <sup>13</sup> (Sögubrot, c. 2).

"That morning Thorstein awoke in his room, and said 'Art thou awake, Thórir?' 'I am,' answered Thórir, 'but have slept till now.' Thorstein said: 'I want to get ready to go away from this room, for I know that Jökull will come hither to-day with many men.' 'I do not think so,' said Thórir, 'and will not go; but how hast thou found it out?' 'I dreamt,' said Thorstein, 'that thirty wolves ran hither and seven bears, with an eighth red-cheeked bear, which was large and fierce; with them also were two she-foxes, which ran ahead of the flock and were rather fierce-looking; I disliked them most. All the wolves attacked us, and it seemed to me that at last they tore all my brothers asunder, except thee alone; but nevertheless thou didst fall. Many thought I was killed by the bears, but I killed all the wolves and the smaller she-fox; then I fell. What thinkest thou this dream signifies?' said Thórir. 'I think,' said Thorstein, 'that the large red-cheeked bear is Jökul's fylgja, but that the other bears are the fylgja of his brothers, and all the wolves I have seen are men with them, for they are likely to show the tempers of wolves to us. With regard to the two she-foxes, I do not know the men who have those fylgja; I think they have lately come to Jökul, and they must be disliked by most men' " ( Thorstein Vikingsson, c. 12).

The child of an Icelandic woman by name of Orny, having been exposed, <sup>14</sup> was saved by a bondi named Krumm, and by him raised as his own, and called Thorstein. One day when the boy was seven years of age Krumm went with him to Krossavik, where the grandfather of the boy, Geitir, lived. While there he rushed forward on the floor, as is the habit of children, stumbled and fell. As Geitir laughed, the boy asked him why he found it so funny. Geitir answered: --

" 'It is true; for I saw that which thou didst not see.' 'What was it?' said Thorstein. 'I can tell thee. When thou camest into the room a young white bear followed thee, and ran before thee on the floor; when he saw me he stopped, but thou didst rush on and stumble over the young bear; I think thou art not the son of Krumm, but of higher kin' " <sup>15</sup> ( *Fornmanna Sögur*, iii. p. 113).

"He ( Thórhalli) dreamt a dream and went northward to Finni. When he came to the door he said: 'I should like thee to explain a dream which I have dreamt.' Finni said: 'Go; I will not hear thy dream,' and pushed the door and said: 'Go away as quick as thou canst, and tell it to Gudmund of Mödruvellir, or else thou shalt be driven away with weapons at once.' Then he went away to Mödruvellir. Gudmund had ridden that day out into the district and was expected home that night. Einar, his brother, lay down and fell asleep. He dreamt that an ox, very fine-looking, with large horns, walked up through the district; it walked up to Mödruvellir and went to every house of the farm, and at last to the high-seat, and there fell dead. Thereupon Einar said: 'This forebodes great tidings, and this is the fylgja of a man.' Then Gudmund came home, and it was his custom to go to every house of the farm bæ. When he had come to his high-seat he leant back and talked with Thórhalli, who told him his dream. Then he rose in the seat when food was brought. It was hot milk, warmed with stones. Gudmund said: 'This is not hot.' Thorlaug said: 'Now I do not know where thy liking for the heat comes from.' He drank again and said: 'This is not hot.' Then he sank backward and was dead. Thorlaug

said: 'This is great tidings, which will be heard widely; no man shall touch him, and often has Einar had forebodings of lesser tidings.' Then Einar came and prepared the body and said: 'Thy dream, Thórhalli, has no small power, <sup>16</sup> and Finni has seen in thee that the man to whom thou didst tell the dream would be death-fated, and he liked Gudmund to become so. Cold must he have been inside, as he did not feel anything (Ljósvetninga, c. 21).

The country as well as the people had its guardian spirits, or *Landvoettir*, by which it and its inhabitants were protected, and which were supposed to assume different shapes. What the Disir and Hamingja were to the family, the Landvoettir were to the whole or a large tract of the country; and though they were sometimes attached to special men, whom they followed, they were more closely connected with the land than with the people, and there was a heathen law in Iceland preventing the people from disturbing them.

They were subordinate to the guardian gods of each country, and excited dreams in men, and on behalf of the guardian god watched over those places at which they dwelt; they especially liked to dwell on mountains, and sometimes the dead were assigned places with them. <sup>17</sup>

"It was the beginning of the heathen laws that, men should not go with a head-ship with dragon-heads) out on the main sea, or, if they did, they should take the heads off before they saw land, and not approach it with gaping heads and yawning snouts, that the *landvoettir* might not be frightened" (Landnama, c. 7).

These landvoettir sometimes loved special men, and followed them.

" Björn (an Icelander) dreamt one night that a rock-dweller came to him and offered to enter into partnership with him, and he consented. Thereafter a he-goat came to his goats, and they increased so much that he soon became very rich. After this he was called He-goat Björn. *Second-sighted* men saw that all *landvoettir* followed He-goat Björn. to the Thing, and Thorstein and Thórd (his brothers) to hunting and fishing (Landnama, iv. c. 12).

Egil, fleeing from the pursuit of King Eirik Bloodaxe and his men, got a vessel to go to Iceland.

"And when they were ready to sail Egil went upon an island. He took into his hand a hazel-pole and went on a projecting rock, pointing landwards. He took a horse's head and it upon the pole; then he said the following words: 'Here I raise a pole as a curse, and I turn this curse upon King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild.' He turned the horse's head so that it pointed landwards. 'I turn this curse on the guardian spirits who dwell in this country, so that; they shall all go astray, and no one of them shall meet or find his home until they have driven King Eirik and Gunnhild from the land. He thrust the pole into a rift in the rock, and let it stand there; he carved runes on the pole which told all this imprecation. Thereupon he went on board ship and sailed" ( Egil's Saga, c. 60).

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> - Alfheim was given to Frey as a tooth-fee.

<sup>2</sup> -Here we see that Svartálfar are Dvergar.

- <sup>3</sup> From this it is supposed that Loki had come in the shape of a fly to make them lose the wager.
- <sup>4</sup> Other texts -- Raum and his kinsmen were tall and ugly.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Gisli Sursson, 22, 24, 30, 33; Halt's Saga, 15; Grimnismal, 53; Atlamal, 23. Fylgjas appeared to people in dreams: Ljósvetaninga, 21; Atlamal, 19; Njal, 12.
- <sup>6</sup> See Vol. ii., p. 423.
- <sup>7</sup> A kind of duel. See p. 563.
- <sup>8</sup> The worship of the Lares and Penates, the household deities who watched over the personal and pecuniary interests of individuals and families, was the most prominent feature of the Etruscan mythology, whence it was borrowed by the Romans. Thence it was also, in all probability, that the Romans obtained their doctrine of an attendant genius watching over every individual from his birth. (See Dennis "Etruria," vol. i., p. 59.)
- <sup>9</sup> (1) Viga Glum, 9; (2) Laxdæla, 26; Snorri, St. Olaf, 68.
- <sup>10</sup> The eagles dreamt of by Angantyr were thought to be the fylgjas of champions (Hervarar Saga, c. 5).  
Thorstein Vikingsson saw in the many bears which attacked him a foreboding of a king or a king's son (Gautrek and Hrolf's Saga; Thorstein Vikingsson, c. 12).  
Thus also Geitir guessed the birth of Thorstein Uxaflot from the white bear cub, which he had observed walking ahead of the latter.
- <sup>11</sup> Njala, 12; Finnbogi Rammi's Saga; Fornmanna Sögur, iii. They are seen in a walking state. Viga Glum's Saga; Halfred's Saga, 22, 24; Va Vatnsdæla, p. 36; Atlamal, 19; Egil's Saga, 50, 60; Sögrubrot, 2.
- <sup>12</sup> The nine women in black had been the Disir of the family, which was going to forsake the old belief; the Disir wanted to take with them the best member of the family before they left. Therefore they slew Thidrandi, whom the nine white Disir try in vain to defend. The nine white Disir were to be the guardian spirit of the family after it had adopted the new belief. From this we can see that the new religion could not entirely overthrow the old superstition and belief.
- <sup>13</sup> Persuaded by Ivar Vidfadmi, Hrærek slew his brother Helgi, thinking he was too good friends with his wife. Afterwards Ivar slew Hrærek in a fight. In the dream Hrærek is the stag, Helgi is the wild beast, Ivar is the dragon, and the she-bear with the cub is Aud with her son.
- <sup>14</sup> See Exposure of Children, Vol. II., p. 39.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. also Orvar Odd's Saga, c. 4.
- <sup>16</sup> This dream seems to have had the power to make the first man who heard it death-fated.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. Olaf Tryggvason's Saga, p. 37.