

Aegir & Ran - Defining the Face of Chaos

By Mark Puryear

We as a religious community have been working diligently in reconstituting and re-establishing the sacred traditions that define who we are, define what path we ourselves are personally on. Here and there we may differ, but collectively we represent a new manifestation of our cultural folk-soul, one that continues to evolve as we gain greater understandings of our faith through the records passed down to us.

It is the understanding of this religion that guides us on our way, which is why it is vital for us to have as clear a picture of the ancient customs as we can find, or develop. For our own spiritual well-being we must be able to recognize the dark and unseemly forces described in our lore, and differentiate them from what is good, benevolent and kind. We must be able to see our gods in a positive light, by also knowing those beings who would oppose them, defy them, or try to destroy them.

The stories handed down to us are symbolic narratives that resonate with us as part of our heritage. These symbols, though to us representing the legacy of actual beings, speak to us through our very souls. Because of this, we need proper and thorough research into our sources that can help us sort out these types of things. And we are in the process of doing this. As an example of such investigations I would like to present to you a recent discovery I made concerning ~Aegir and Ran.

Previously, this couple has been represented as divine, as a god and goddess of the sea. Ran herself is mentioned in a Christian-era tradition as being a sort of caretaker for drowned sailors in the afterlife, which paints her as a benign deity, while Aegir is seen to hold his feast for the gods in the poem Lokasenna. If we closely examine our sources we may see an entirely different picture unfold.

First, let us look at Aegir. The evidence left to us about him in several sources has been scrutinized in the past, but only to serve preconceived notions about his identity as a sea-god. Scholars would like to see him as a sort of Teutonic version of the Greek Oceanus, a titan who rules over the outer sea encircling the earth. Aegir is no doubt a giant, and his tumultuous behavior in the ocean is seen as simply a representation of natural phenomena, which doesn't seem to put him at odds with the divine order. Certainly other giants, such as Mimir and Ullr, are viewed as benevolent, so this does not disqualify Aegir from the pantheon.

Our ancestors viewed every single element in nature as having a dual function, one serving the gods and the forces of order, the other serving the forces of chaos, namely the "evil" giants. The sea was no different. On the one side it is the pathway to commerce, fishing, sunken treasures, etc., and in this capacity is represented by Njordr, who is also god of prosperity (Gylf 23). As we see lightning patroned by Thor for the order and

Hrungnir for chaos, fire is represented by Heimdall for the order and Loki for chaos, so too must there be a chaotic and therefore not divine representative of the sea. As father of the nine waves, Aegir sees to the fearful aspects of the ocean, to those elements of sea-faring that take the lives of sailors whirlpools, tidal waves, rough waters, you name it.

But how can such a justification be drawn? We will now look at our sources to see, point by point, Aegir's true place in our lore.

In the opening prose of Lokasenna we are told that "Aegir [is] also known as Gymir". This has presented a problem for some researchers who would maintain that Aegir is a benevolent god. Gymir is clearly defined as an enemy of the gods and a proponent of the forces of chaos. In the poem Skirnismál he is described as a vicious monster who would violently oppose the marriage of his daughter, Gerd, to Freyr (str. 24). To make up for this discrepancy, these two names have been made out to designate two different beings, although Aegir and Gymir are clearly one and the same. In Lokasenna, Loki tells Freyr: "With gold did you buy the daughter of Gymir", whereas we have already seen that the author of this poem identifies Gymir with Aegir.

In Skaldskaparmál 66 and 80 there are three terms used to represent the sea: Aegir (ocean), Gymir (engulfer) and Hlǫr (roarer). Consequently, in Skaldsk. 29 Snorri states: "it is implied that they are all the same, Aegir and Hlǫr and Gymir". Aegir's home is Hlesey (Skaldsk. 1), a place we find elsewhere to have giants and giantesses that oppose the gods. In the poem Harbarokljúð, strophe 37-39, Thor and Thjalfi are said to have faced off with "Berserkers' brides on Hlesey". His home is said to be filled with gold, as stated in Lokasenna: "shining gold was used there [at Aegir's] instead of firelight, and the beer served itself to the guests". The same is said in Skaldsk. 1 of two swords in Aegir's hail. With this we can compare Skirnismál 22, where Gerǫr tells Skirnir: "I have no lack of gold in Gymir's courts, for I share my father's wealth".

Remember that, in Hymiskvida, Aegir is not portrayed as a willing participant in the feast he is to give for the gods. It seems as though he is commanded by Thor to hold the feast in order to create a peace alliance between them, which may keep his chaotic forces at bay. Indeed, Hymiskv. 2-3 states: "Ygg's son [Thor] looked threateningly into his [Aegir's] eyes: 'You shall often hold a feast for the gods'. The unwelcome-worded As [Thor] caused trouble for the giant: he quickly thought of vengeance on the gods." Hardly the kind of sentiment you would expect from one of the "gentle powers" (Vafthr. 17).

So we can easily see that Aegir is not a god, but rather a cruel giant who rejects union with the Vanir, and desires vengeance on the gods for making him brew a mead feast for them each year. We can further recognize his malevolent nature through the identity of his wife, Ran. It can easily be demonstrated that she is not the kind, compassionate caretaker of the drowned, as later Christian sources made her out to be. Again, we examine her position in the myths point by point.

The following statements are made about Ran, depicting her as the giantess who causes drownings and shipwrecks:

"But sea-crest Sleipnir [ship], spray-driven, tears his breast, covered with red-paint, out of white Ran's mouth." (Skaldsk. 29)

"You were, hag, before the prince's ships, and lay before them in the fjord's mouth, you would have given the chieftain's warriors to Ran, if a bar had not stopped you." (Helgakviða Hundingsbana I str. 30) ... The royal ship was wrested from the hand of Ran at Gnipalund." (Helgakviða Hundingsbana I str. 30)

In Gylfaginning ch. 37 it is stated that "Gymir was the name of a man whose wife, Aurboda, came from the family of mountain giants." Voluspá hin Skamma (str. 2) says the same thing: "Frey's wife was Gerd, the daughter of Gyrnir, sprung from giants, Aurboda bore her." Since we have proven that Gymir is identical to Aegir, it follows that Ran would be identical to Aurboda. Because it is beyond the scope of this investigation to show all of the evidence for this, I would refer the reader to Viktor Rydberg's Investigations into Germanic Mythology, Vol I, Cli 35, which demonstrates Aurboda's identity with Gullveigr, Heidr, Angrboda and Hyrrokin.

The name Ran means "robber" or "plunderer", which should be compared with Gullveig, which means "thirsty for gold".

Rydberg notes (Investigations, Vol I, Cli 104) that Gullveig, mother of Habi, is identical to Grendel's mother in Beowulf Grendel's mother is a "she-wolf of the deep" and a mermaid (merewif) (see Beowulf 1260-1, 1507, 1519). Gymir's wife is also a mermaid, hence Skaldsk. 25:

"Gymir's Ur-cold spae-wife often brings the twisted-rope-bear [ship] into Aegir's jaws where the wave breaks". (Here the meaning of "Ur-cold" or "Ursvol" is "primeval cold", relating to the same kind of cold from which Ymir developed; see Gylf. Cli. 5 where Ymir is formed from frozen poison drops melted from the heat of southerly regions.)

It is interesting to note the relationship between Ran and Loki, as with Aurboda and Loki. In Voluspa hin Skamma it says that "Loki bore the wolf with Angrboda". This should be compared to Voluspá 41: "To the East in the Ironwood lives the ancient giantess, and there fosters the brood of Fenris". In Gylfaginning 50 Loki creates the first net of its kind, while in Skaldskaparmál 33 Ran is said to have a net "in which she caught everyone that went to sea". In the opening prose to Reginsmál Loki is said to borrow Ran's net in order to capture the dwarf Andvari in the shape of a pike.

We see that Gullveig-Aurboda is the Teutonic female symbol of chaos, who brought the black art, Seidr (see Voluspa 22) to Midgardr. Her system of sorcery is supposed to be the antithesis of the holy runes brought by Heimdallr to our Folk. In correspondence to this Hattatal 17 states that "Ran is immorality".

In Voluspá 25 it is asked "Who had filled all the air with evil, or given Odr's maid [Freyja] to the giant race?" This is answered by strophe 21, which describes Gullveig's

punishment for her crimes. In consideration of this we must recognize that Gullveig was once in Asgard and allowed to exist among Freyja's household, just as Loki was permitted in Valhalla. This statement is corroborated by Fjölsvinnsmál 39 where Aurboda is mentioned in the entourage of Menglad-Freyja (see Rydberg's Investigations, Vol 1, Cli. 97). This explains why, in Skaldskaparmál 80, Ran is listed among the Asynjur, although Aegir is never mentioned among the gods.

These proofs point to the conclusion that Aegir and Ran should not be recognized among the pantheon of beneficent gods and goddesses. Aegir is forced to hold his feast for them, and resents them for this, while Ran- Gullveig betrays Freyja and hands her over to the forces of chaos.

If we are to find sanctity and legitimacy in our lore, we must be able to identify those characters our ancestors viewed as harmful and destructive. Our people are practical, as well as creative, and would not make holy the roaring (Hlǫr) ocean (Aegir) that engulfs (Gymir) ships or robs (Ran) men of life and property.