

**The Identity of the God Ríg
from the Eddic Poem Rígsthúla
By Sagamaster**

Over the years as I have read and reread the poem Rígsthúla (the Lay of Ríg), and spoken to various people about this poem, I have always felt that Ríg had been misidentified as the god Heimdall. Granted, we have far less lore or knowledge available to us as was once available, but using what we do have - the two Eddas, Heimskringla, and the Gesta Danorum, I intend to show that Ríg has indeed been misidentified and is actually the god Odin.

To start with, there are only two pieces of extant lore upon which the identity Ríg as Heimdall has been based. The first is the from the poem Völuspá. The first half of verse one reads (in translation):

"Attention I ask from all the sacred people Greater and lesser, the offspring of Heimdall..."(1)

The second comes from the prose introduction of the poem itself:

"It is told by men in olden days that one of the gods whose name was Heimdall, fared forth..."(2)

While both of these can be fairly damning to my position, especially the latter, I will show that this is not the case. In the first instance, it was common in Old Norse poetry to use the name of a god to represent all of the deities. This was most commonly done with the name "T?r". Two such examples are "Hangatyr" (god of the gallows) and "Farmatyr" (god of cargoes). Both of these are common terms for the god Odin. Another similar example is using the name "Gaut". This is the name of a giant, but poetically was used to refer to all giants.(3) In the second case, Hollander states in the general introduction that the prose portions leading into and following the actual poems was created by the scribe who copied the poems into the manuscripts. This would then include the prose introduction to Rígsþúla. The earliest manuscripts were written in the early 13th century.(4)

From this we can move to the conclusion that unless this scribe was reading material not included in the manuscript, he based his determination of Ríg as Heimdall solely on the basis of verse one of the Völuspá. In my opinion, this error comes about due to the scribe's ignorance of the Viking Age Nordic poetic conventions, particularly the one mentioned above. Thus, when he was writing the prose connections between each poem, he assumed that since Völuspá calls lesser beings "Heimdall's children", that the god in Rígsþúla must be Heimdall, not realizing that the use of a god's name could be being used to refer to all the gods.

If, then, Ríg is not Heimdall, as I believe, who is Ríg? It is my belief that the deity that descended Bifrost to walk along the shore was Odin. Why, you may ask? To me the choice is obvious, but since the reader cannot see into my mind, I shall put my reasoning into print. I take all examples and base my belief from the extant lore. I will start with what we know of Heimdall and then move to Odin.

In truth, what we know of Heimdall is quite sparse in comparison to the majority of the other gods and goddesses. We know that he is the warder of Asgard, waiting to sound Gjallarhorn, which will resound through the Nine Worlds, that Ragnarok has begun.(5) We know that he is counted among the Æsir, yet is able to prophesy like the Vanir.(6) He is said to be the son of Odin and nine mothers - sisters and the daughters of Ægir and Ran.(7) We know he is a warrior for he fights Loki on two occasions - once for the possession of Brisingamen on behalf of Freyja(8) and at Ragnarok where they kill each other.(9) Other than this there is little known of him.

However, based on this knowledge, there are some things that we can ascertain. Heimdall is not a "wandering god". As stated above, he is the "Warder of Asgard". He cannot do this duty properly if he is wandering in spite of his ocular and auditory gifts.(10) We have only three instances of him having left his post (assuming we accept that Heimdall is not Ríg): Ægir's feast in Lokasenna, His battle with Loki at Singasteinn (11), and at Ragnarok.

The lore makes no mention that Heimdall is familiar with the use of runes. As stated above, the lore mentions that he is able to prophesy like the Vanir can. However, this type of magic was seidr.(12) To be fair, though, I have to say that just because something is not mentioned in the lore does not mean that it is not so. The fact that Heimdall could do rune craft may be among lost lore. However, it is highly doubtful. On a positive side for Heimdall, as a warrior he would have been familiar with the weapons and tactics that had been taught to Jarl and Kon.

One last bit of information, but this time from a more metaphysical level. If one looks closely to the examples of various beings who are able to shape-shift and the need or lack of aids to attain a form, one notices a theme. The Æsir seem to be limited to attain bird forms. The Vanir and Jotuns to earth-bound forms. Granted there are exceptions to this - Odin is able to attain several forms and there are a couple of giants that are able to attain the form of eagles. While Heimdall is counted among the Æsir, the only animal form that he is recorded assuming is that of a seal(13) - technically an earth-bound form as it cannot fly. It may be that as Heimdall is half Jotun, he maybe limited to the earthbound forms. It is also possible that the ability to other forms is in material lost to us. However, since I am focusing on the extant lore, I have to assume that he is limited to the earth-bound forms. As such, it would seem logical that he would not have the ability of bird speech as described in Rígsthúla.(14)

Now I turn to Odin. Odin is known, among other names, as the "Alfadir" (All-father). He, along with his brothers Villi and Vé (Hœnir and Loki in some versions), created the first humans - Askr and Embla (15). It is logical and right, that in his role as All-father, that he would later return to create the three estates of humans as described in the lay. Especially since he has ties to two of these estates. As "Farnatyr" (god of cargoes or burdens) he has associations to trade. This is an occupation that both the free and noble classes participated in. Also, as a war god he is attached to both levels as warriors came from both classes.

At least half of the poem, however, deals with the offspring of Ríg and Modhir - Jarl and Kon. Odin is The god of war. It is he that decides which side of a conflict will win. Thus it is more natural for him to offer the advice that would lead to victories. Odin has the finest of horses (16), Sleipnir, so who would be more natural to teach fine horsemanship? Odin is also known to be a

wandering god who occasionally uses disguises. He has been a fieldworker, ferryman, and beggar among others.(17)

On the less physical level, Odin is the finder and the ultimate sentient master of the runes.(18) It is most logical that he be the instructor to Jarl and Kon. And it is Odin who is shown several times taking bird form.(19) This would then enable him to teach the language of birds.

Lastly, It has always be Odin that has been seen as the god most closely associated with the nobility. These associations are put forth frequently in the various sagas and legend holds that he was the founder of the royal families in Denmark and of the Anglo/Saxons. This, then would seem to make it much more probable that he would be the progenitor of the noble class itself.

Therefore, when the known attribute of the two gods are compared in relation to the actions of Ríg, it can be seen that the true identity of Ríg is more likely to be Odin rather than Heimdall. Odin is a wandering god, Heimdall is not. Odin is a runemaster, there is no evidence as such for Heimdall. Odin has more direct ties to at least two of the classes created by Ríg - the Freemen and the Nobility. Odin can take bird form and thus speak the language, there is no evidence for this ability for Heimdall.

It should be noted that the point of this paper is not to lessen the importance of Heimdall in the pantheon of the Nordic deities. It is to show that placing a deity into a role on two pieces of evidence - one of which come from a period well after the composition of the poem, the other a probable misinterpretation by the non-heathen scribe who created the former piece - is an error in scholarship. Heimdall's position as Warder of Asgard is a very important one and one I hope he has for a very, very long time.

1. Poetic Edda, Carolyne Larrington translation, p 4; 1996
2. Poetic Edda, Lee Hollander translation, p 120; 1962
3. Edda, p 74; Faulkes translation, 1987
4. Hollander, p XIV
5. Hollander & Larrington - Völ. 27, 45; Grim. 13; Skír. 28n; Lok. 48; Faulkes - Pp. 25 & 54
6. Hollander and Larrington - Thrym. 15
7. Faulkes - Pp. 26 & 76
8. *ibid.* - P 76
9. *ibid.* - P 54
10. *ibid.* - P 25. Snorri states that Heimdall needs less sleep than a bird, can see 100 leagues at night as well as day, and hear the grass on the ground and the wool on a sheep grow and anything that is louder. These are eminent gifts for one who needs to be ever vigilant.
11. This battle is referred to in Snorri's Edda as having been more fully described in the lost poem Heimdagaldr.
12. Ynglinga Saga Chs. 4 & 7, Heimskringla, Snorri Sturluson; Samuel Lainge Trans.; London, 1844
13. Heimdagaldr as quoted by Snorri
14. Verse 48
15. Larrington & Hollander - Völ. 3; Faulkes - P 13

16. Faulkes - P 17; Hollander & Larrington - Grím. 45
17. Larrington & Hollander - Völ., various verses of Háv., Vaf., Grím., Hár.; Faulkes Pp. 13, 21, 63
18. *ibid.* - Háv. 138 - 163
19. Faulkes - 63-64