

## Theonymic Indications of a Distant Indo-European/Sumerian Relationship?

L. G. HELLER

A RECURRING PROBLEM for students of Germanic and Indo-European mythology is that relating to the displacement of the chief deity of the Indo-European pantheon to a less central position in Germanic. Thus the theonym (god name) which appears as *Zeus* in Greek, as *Iuppiter* (the *piter* from earlier *pater* "father") or *Iovis* "Jove" in Latin, or as *deva* "deity" in Sanskrit shows up as *Tīw* (the *Tue* of *Tuesday* from earlier *Tīwes dæg*) in Old English and as *Týr* in Old Norse. In Germanic the deity served as the god of courage, not as the head of the pantheon, as in Latin and Greek. He was the only god who dared place his hand in the mouth of the giant wolf Fenris when his fellows were trying to outwit and bind that creature. Different etymologists have, with some phonological plausibility, connected the stem underlying the names with words such as the Latin *diēs* "day," Old English *tīm* and *tīd*, the latter two both (with different suffixes) meaning "time," and the Sanskrit *dideti* "it shines." One may perhaps postulate an original sun deity, the sun being a widespread, although not necessarily universal, measure of time. A consideration of this enigma, however, opens up a much broader and in some ways more tantalizing puzzle, namely that of the remote possibility of some distant relationship between Indo-European and Sumerian.

That the Indo-Europeans worshiped the sun would not be difficult to prove. Indeed, one could adduce evidence for at least three or more layers or generations of sun deities in the ancient pantheon. Just to cite Greek alone, besides Zeus himself, if, as suggested, Zeus was a sun god, one also has both the older Helios and likewise Zeus' son Apollo, whose name is probably cognate with *Balder*, the name of the sun god of the Germanic tribes. In view of the centrality of the solar myth to the ancient Indo-Europeans, one may wonder then how *Wodin* or *Odin*, often presumed to have been a weather or storm god, could have ousted a sun deity from the major position in the religious observance of the Germanic descendants of the Indo-Europeans. The answer, surprising as it may seem perhaps, is that *Wodin* himself was a sun deity in origin. The connection with storms will be suggested in a moment.

A major clue to Wodin's earliest function may be seen in the fact that he had only one eye. It was not uncommon in ancient mythology to refer to the sun as the "eye of heaven." Thus Wodin's one eye may originally have been the sun itself. Wodin was also depicted as riding an eight-legged steed, Sleipnir, across the sky. Apollo, the Greek deity rode a chariot drawn by two horses, which together possessed eight legs, the same number as Wodin's mount. The Germanic tribes, of course, did not use chariots, so an earlier two-horse chariot necessarily shows up in Germanic as a single horse, but an unusual one having eight feet.

Balder, clearly a sun god and also Wodin's son in the Germanic pantheon, was married to a moon deity named *Nanna*. An ancient Sumerian moon god bore the same name, *Nanna*, although this deity was male, not female.

Wodin's oldest son was Thor, the god of strength. An earlier form of the name, *þunr*, presupposes a pre-Grimm's Law stem *\*tun-*, often connected by Germanistics with an Indo-European morpheme underlying the word *thunder*. Yet the characteristic feature normally associated with Thor was his hammer or axe, which he wielded with deadly efficiency. The Sumerian word for "hammer" or "axe" was *tun*.

Wodin was normally accompanied by a pet raven wherever he went. In Indo-European mythology the raven often appeared as the harbinger of death. A last vestige of this tradition remains in the raven depicted with witches or Halloween. In Sumerian the same stem, *ug*, meant both "raven" and "death."

As to the name *Wodin* itself, one finds a potential correlate (minus the nasal suffix) in the *Ud* or *Utu* who served as a sun deity in Sumerian. The same word also means both "time" and "storm" in that language, the latter possibility according well with the mythological attributes of Wodin.

The Germanic god who possessed the ancient ring by which mortals swore and who was the one god to take Wodin's place when that leader was away, was *Ullr* or *Ulle*. Clearly this deity must have been a time-related god as well. The Sumerian *ulla* means "ancient." The word occurs frequently in the phrase *ud-ul-li-a-ta*, literally "from ancient suns," more freely "from ancient days."

One may reasonably ask where this analysis is leading. Obviously the presence of the same element in two different languages presupposes any one of only three possibilities:

- (1) chance resemblance,
- (2) loan transmission, or
- (3) genetic inheritance from the same common source.

If any or all of the foregoing observations are plausible, the sheer number of elements involved greatly reduces the likelihood of chance resemblance

as a reasonable explanation. If one raises the question of loan transmission, one must necessarily ask via what route. If one suggests genetic inheritance, one must go beyond these resemblances to postulate others as well. Thus far, of course, scholars have suggested no linguistic affinities for Sumerian. This writer must confess, however, that in teaching that language the thought has occurred more than once that, taking the time span into consideration, a *very* distant genetic relationship to Indo-European would not be beyond reason because of occasional lexical and structural similarities, particularly those in closed systems such as the pronominal which, as a result of rule-based frequency of occurrence, typically resist change. Thus, for example, the Sumerian first-person singular pronoun shows an *m* parallel to the Indo-European *m*,<sup>1</sup> the second-person singular shows a sibilant, *z*,<sup>2</sup> perhaps parallel to the Indo-European *s*. (Indo-European, of course, as now reconstructed did not differentiate voiceless from voiced sibilants.) The plural of the first and second persons was formed in Sumerian by the addition of a separate plural suffix, normally *-ene*, to the singular. A nasal plural mark appears sporadically in Indo-European, as in the East Greek first-person plural *-men* (as opposed to the West Greek *-mes*) or the more widespread *-nt-* of the third-person plural (which contrasts with the third-person singular in *-t-*). The third-person pronominal forms are simple demonstratives, an apical nasal (*-n-*) for Sumerian but an apical stop (*-t-*) for Indo-European. Yet both languages had other demonstrative marks, and, if there was a distant genetic relationship, sheer chance alone might well have dictated which demonstrative generalized as the verbal pronominal.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the intent here, however, to build a case for, or even to assert, much less argue for, a genetic relationship. Nevertheless, consider the theonymic evidence:

(1) The presupposition of a possible *Ud/Utu* and *Wod(in)/Od(in)* connection makes the Germanic deity a sun god, a fact that accords well with the suggestion regarding Wodin's one eye.

<sup>1</sup> Sumerian has *-mu* for the nominative and accusative, and *-ma* for the other cases, the *-u* and *-a* constituting separate case-marking morphemes. Indo-European sometimes has *-mi*, rather than the simple *-m*, the *-i* constituting the deictic particle meaning "here" and "now."

<sup>2</sup> Sumerian has *-zu* and *-za* parallel to the *-mu* and *-ma* discussed in footnote 1. Likewise the Indo-European shows *-si* as well as *-s*.

<sup>3</sup> One might note in passing that the Uralic and Altaic languages also show similar pronominal equations, *-m* for the first-person singular, *-s* for the second-person singular, *-m* plus a plural mark for the first-person plural, but *t* plus a plural mark for the second-person plural — a pattern which is quite regular in Indo-European, as in the Latin *-tis* from earlier *\*-tes*, and a demonstrative for the third person forms. Some Altaic languages which diverge from this pattern by having a *-b* rather than an *-m* for the first-person forms likewise show an accusative singular *-b* paralleling the regular Indo-European and Uralic *-m* accusative singular. The Uralic and Altaic also show the *-n-* as a plural mark (for nouns).

(2) The *Nanna* versus *Nanna* moon-god equation is excellent.

(3) The *tun* versus *Thor* (< IE \**tun*-) equation is excellent.

(4) The other elements although less convincing by themselves do suggest *some* relationship which calls for explanation.

It is undeniably true that the foregoing fragments of an ancient puzzle hardly constitute proof of either transmission or of genetic inheritance. Yet even if such examples should represent accidental similarities, the coincidences may be too felicitous to be passed over in silence.

The City College of the City University of New York

#### NOTICE

An announcement has just been received concerning the Eleventh International Congress of Onomastic Sciences to be held next year (1972) in Sofia, Bulgaria, from June 28 to July 4. The main themes of the congress will be (a) onomastic research and historical geography and (b) the problem of transcribing personal names.

The number of sections will be determined by the scope and variety of papers submitted; a tentative distribution is as follows:

1. Generalia, methodology, systematics.
2. Slavic and Baltic onomastics.
3. Germanic onomastics.
4. Romanic onomastics.
5. Onomastic research in other IE languages.
6. Onomastic research in other language families.
7. Interlinguistic contact in onomastics.
8. Toponymy and cartography.

Notification of attendance and other correspondence should be addressed to

Eleventh International Congress  
of Onomastic Sciences  
Organizing Committee  
Moskovska 27 B  
Sofia  
Bulgaria