The Waning Sword
Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in Beowulf

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Arguably the most remarkable image in *Beowulf* appears soon after the hero beheads Grendel’s mother with a single sword-stroke—itself an extraordinary feat and a moment of genuine horror— and then decapitates her lifeless son in the giants’ lair at the bottom of a Danish mere. After Beowulf is deserted by the Danes who had waited for his return at the water’s surface, something remarkable happens to the blade of the golden-hilted giant sword with which he dispatched both monsters. As described from the poet’s perspective:

Pa þæt sweord ongan
æfter heaþoswate  hildegicelum,
wigbil, wanian;  þæt wæs wundra sum
þæt hit eal gemealt,  ise gelicost
ðonne forstes bend  fæder onlæteð,
onwinedð værlapas,  se geweald hafað
sæla ond mæla;  þæt is soð metod.
Ne nom he in þæm wicum,  Weder-Geata leod,
maðmahta ma,  þeh he þær monige geseah,
buton þone hafelan  ond þa hilt somod,
since fage;  sweord ær gemealt,
forbarn brodenmæl;  wæs þæt blod to þæs hat,
ættren ellorgæst  se þær inne swealt. (1605–17)

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1 This point, which underlines the achievement of both Beowulf and the giant sword, is well made by G. R. Owen-Crocker, ‘Horror in *Beowulf*: Mutilation, Decapitation, and Unburied Dead’, in E. Treharne and S. Rosser (ed.), *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg* (Tempe, 2002), 81–100, who notes: ‘Decapitation in pitched battle is clearly unusual. Beowulf’s feat in achieving this against Grendel’s mother … is a triumph of opportunism and speed: he sees a gigantic sword and acts fast. We must not underestimate it’ (99).
Then the sword, the war-bill, after/because of the battle-sweat [i.e., blood],
began to wane [i.e., diminish] with/into battle-icicles; it was a great wonder
that it entirely [or ‘all’] melted, just like ice when the Father, who has control
of times and seasons,\textsuperscript{2} loosens frost’s bonds, unwinds well-ropes\textsuperscript{3} [i.e., ice
covering deep pools]; that is the true Measurer. He [i.e., Beowulf], prince of
the We(a)ther-Geatas,\textsuperscript{4} did not take in that dwelling more precious objects,
although he saw many there, than the head and the hilt, shining with treasure;
the sword[-blade] had earlier melted, the wavy-marked [blade] burnt up; the
blood was hot to that extent, the alien visitor/spirit poisonous (to that extent)
which died therein.

Later in the poem, Beowulf describes the blade’s demise from his
perspective, which lacks the poet’s macrocosmic analogy and, indeed,
any reference to ice. He simply informs Hroðgar how \textit{þæt hildebil /
forbarn brogdenæl, swa þæt blod gesprang, / hatost heaposwata} ‘the battle-
bill burnt up, the wavy-marked [blade], as the blood sprang out, hottest
of battle-sweats’ (1666–8).

The poet’s image of the sword-blade \textit{wanian} ‘waning/diminishing’,\textsuperscript{5}
of how it \textit{gemealt} ‘melted’ and \textit{forbarn} ‘burnt up’, which occurs at the
centre of the poem, is striking. In my view, these three verbs describe
the same ongoing destructive event, as there is no indication that the
blade burst into shards which only subsequently melted (the supposed
shards then being what is meant by the term \textit{hildegicelum} ‘battle-icicles’).
Unlike Beowulf’s sword Nægling which, towards the end of the poem,
\textit{forbærst} ‘burst apart’ (2680) against the dragon’s head, it seems clear
that the giant sword did not break against the toughness of its two
victims. Instead, it was a process of dissolution with a beginning—the
blade \textit{ongan} ‘began’ to wane—and a distinct end. It did not disintegrate
instantaneously. Nor would it make sense for it to shatter in contact with

\textsuperscript{2} On the elusiveness of a precise translation for \textit{sæla ond mæla}, see E. R. Anderson, 
\textit{Understanding Beowulf as an Indo-European Epic: A Study in Comparative Mythology}
(Lewiston, 2010), 261. He suggests that ‘in good times and [other] times’ might
capture part of the meaning. In the context, other potentially relevant senses of \textit{mæl}
\textsuperscript{3} Or ‘whirlpool/pool-ropes’ or ‘slaughter/destruction-ropes’.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Weder-Geatas} is usually translated ‘Weather-Geats’, but Gräslund, \textit{Beowulfkvädet},
argues that in this term \textit{weder} originally meant ‘wether’, the ram being a symbol of
a Gotlandic people.
\textsuperscript{5} At the end of this study I suggest attributing celestial significance, among other
things, to this waning.
a liquid. Rather, it seems clear that its iron blade gradually diminished by melting and burning in the monstrous blood’s ferocious heat.\(^6\)

Not only is this image of the blade’s demise remarkable, it is surely highly significant as a \textit{wunder sum} ‘great wonder’, which the poet equates, in an ‘all but epic simile’,\(^7\) with God’s deliverance of the world and its waters from the icy grip of winter.\(^8\) But despite the image’s centrality, length and evident importance, scholars have not, as Andy Orchard has noted, found a credible source for it.\(^9\) Nor, in my view, have they satisfactorily explained why, from the poet’s perspective, the blade diminished ‘with/into battle-icicles’, as the following selective overview of their thoughts may demonstrate.

Prior Views on the Melting of the Giant Sword

More than one scholar has compared the melting of the giant sword’s blade to that of the dragon which the hero Sigemund pierced with his sword earlier in the poem: \textit{wyrm hat gemealt} ‘the hot snake melted’ or ‘heat melted the snake’ (897).\(^10\) This comparison has some merit,
especially as the dragon which later kills Beowulf breathes fire that
seems likened to blazing swords. But the Sigemund-episode makes no
mention of a sword melting, or of icicles or ice.

Scholars have also compared the blade’s melting in hot monster-
blood to references to the corrosive blood of horses and he-goats in Pliny
the Elder’s first-century Naturalis Historia ‘Natural History’ (28.41) and
medieval bestiaries. A passage from the mid-seventh- to mid-eighth-
century Anglo-Latin Liber monstrorum ‘Book of Monsters’, describing
a beast whose poison is so potent that it melts the cutting edges of
an iron weapon, has rightly also been highlighted. But, again, these
parallels go only so far, as they make no mention of icicles or ice. Nor
do the medieval Irish passages describing hot, corrosive blood adduced
by Martin Puhvel. Nor, again, does a nineteenth-century Icelandic
folktale about a marvellous scythe that melts like wax when held over a
fire, which the same scholar says bears only a superficial resemblance to
the melting of Beowulf’s giant sword.

Another proposed analogue, or even source, appears in the twelfth
book of Virgil’s Aeneid. It records that Aeneas’ enemy, Turnus, his
original sword having snapped, seized his charioteer’s sword, which
glacies ceu futtilis ictu dissiluit ‘like brittle ice, flew asunder at the stroke’
(740–1). There is some similarity between this passage and the failure,
though not fracture, of Hrunting in Beowulf (1522–8), followed by
the icicle-like melting of the giant sword. But the fact remains that

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11 See Chapter 14.
12 Nor do other instances of melting in the poem—those of human heads (1120);
Beowulf’s hall under dragon-fire (2326); and treasure, along with Beowulf’s body
(3011). Note too that Wiglaf’s spirit ne gemealt ‘did not melt’ (2628) in the face of the
climactic dragon.
13 Whitman, ‘Corrosive Blood’.
14 Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 111–2, 300–1. I return to it in Chapter 14.
M. Puhvel, Beowulf and Celtic Tradition (Waterloo, Ontario, 1979), 39–44. Another
medieval Irish text describes how the ornament on a burning sword melted in the
heat generated by the sword’s use, but there is no analogy with ice; J. H. Todd (ed.),
16 Puhvel, Beowulf, 40. As I hope will become apparent in Chapter 3, however, this
image may well parallel a key aspect of what was in the Anglo-Saxon poet’s mind.
(Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000), 352–3.
18 Cf. also the closely following image of Turnus as a stag fleeing a hound with Beowulf
1367–72.
the charioteer’s sword shattered against the armour of Vulcan worn by Aeneas—it did not melt in hot monster-blood. As with Nægling, shattering is a common fate of the overtaxed sword in heroic literature,\(^{19}\) but such a manner of destruction appears crucially different from the melting of the giant sword’s blade after it had succeeding in delivering its blows. Andy Orchard, who proposed this analogue, acknowledges that ‘as it stands the parallel might not seem very secure’, but suggests that ‘one need only imagine a variant text reading dissoluit (‘dissolves’) to provide a much better match’.\(^{20}\) No such variant is known, however, and unless perhaps the armour of the fire-god Vulcan was supposed to be extraordinarily hot, ice identified as futtilis ‘brittle’\(^{21}\) might be expected to shatter, rather than melt, under sudden violent contact.

Stephen Glosecki compares the giant sword’s melting with words spoken by the reciter of an Old English metrical charm from the collection known as Lacnunga ‘Remedies’.\(^{22}\) A patient having been pierced by a supernatural iron spearhead which remained in the body, the healer declares:

> ‘Gif herinne sy isenes dæl,  
> hæggessan geweorc, hit sceal gemyltan!’

> ‘If herein there should be a piece of iron, the work of a witch [or ‘witches’], it shall melt!’\(^{23}\)

This comparison has merit in that here we have a piece of iron weapon of supernatural make melting. It does not melt in blood, however; nor is there mention of ice. Also, the melting iron is here the cause of affliction, rather than the means of its relief.

Another scholar, Caroline Brady, adduces no comparable images of melting in Old English texts, but focuses on the kenning hildegicelum

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21 C. T. Lewis and C. Short, A Latin Dictionary (Oxford, 1879), s.v. This is the only instance of the sense ‘brittle’ cited therein for this word.  
‘with/into battle-icicles’. She claims that the giant sword was probably grægmæl ‘grey/silver-marked’ (2682), and that this attribute, together with the polished nature of a pattern-welded sword-blade, enables us to ‘envision the shimmering sheen of the blade as Beowulf raised it high and then, after he swung it down to cut off Grendel’s head, we can also envision the fine steely iron melting into hoar-frosty splinters in the demonic blood hotter than the hellfire’. She adds: ‘Obviously -gicel [‘icicle’] is a metaphor, a conscious transfer—based on resemblance—from the primary referent, “splinters” of ice melting when spring comes, to another, “splinters of frosty steel,” with which it is not essentially, even for the moment, identical, the two referents standing in different referential and semantic ranges.’ But the term grægmæl is used only of the sword Nægling later in the poem, when, as we have noted, it shatters, rather than melts, against a dragon’s skull. Also, splinters/shards result from shattering, not melting.

Alvin Lee similarly addresses the significance of hildegicelum without reference to other texts. For him, this term, which would seem ‘bizarre and far-fetched’ in isolation, becomes explicable and ‘singularly effective’ when viewed in its verbal and narrative context. The identification of melting blade and melting icicles is then seen to do a ‘significant piece of strong poetic work,’ and in hildegicelum ‘a major pattern of meaning comes to its climax.’ Lee relates the hilde- ‘battle’ part to the preceding struggle between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother and to the beheading of Grendel. He also observes that ‘there is a kind of visual accuracy in the notion of the melting metal looking like melting ice, but there is more to the figure than that.’ He relates the -gicelum ‘icicles’ part to preceding references to the overtaking of the world by the winter associated with the depredations of Grendel. This monster, who existed in ‘perpetual night’ (sinnihte 161) and inhabited windswept headlands and a mere above which the skies wept and frost-covered trees bent, brought twelve winters (years) (twelf wintra tid 147) of misery

25 A. A. Lee, Gold-Hall and Earth-Dragon: Beowulf as Metaphor (Toronto, 1998), 66–70.
26 Lee, Gold-Hall, 66.
27 Lee, Gold-Hall, 66, 68.
28 Lee, Gold-Hall, 69.
upon the Danes of Heorot. It is this frosty rule, together with the wintry waters in which sea-monsters assailed Beowulf during his swimming contest with Breca, that the melting of the blade ‘with battle-icicles’ puts an end to: ‘All this background, I suggest, prepares for the kenning hildegicelum. The battle fought by Beowulf on behalf of Heorot is a battle for life, living things, freedom of movement, and human joy against death, shadowy demonic beings, enslavement by powers of darkness, and the joylessness of a frozen world locked in wintry bonds.’

Daniel Anlezark has also contributed to the discussion: ‘From fiery battle-blade the sword has been metaphorically changed into a cool battle icicle, a transformation that mimics the alternation of heat and cold used in a sword’s manufacture, but furthermore deploying the seasonal image of melting ice to evoke the symbolic renewal of life that the destruction of the murderous Grendel-kin signals.’ I would qualify this observation by noting that, strictly speaking, the poet does not liken the giant sword to a single icicle, and that the plurality of hildegicelum is arguably suggestive of the multiple cold iron rods from which pattern-welded blades were made, an analogy perhaps encouraged by the first syllable of OE isern ‘iron’, which sounds the same as OE is ‘ice’. It may be, therefore, that as the blade melts, it not only disappears but is figuratively unmade.

For Earl R. Anderson, hildegicelum, ‘a nonce-compound, is the semantic center of gravity’ in ‘the perfect simile’. He adds that:

The poet fashioned this unique compound [i.e., hildegicelum] just for this one sword-blade, in an artistic act of morphological iconicity. The blade was ise

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29 Lee, Gold-Hall, 70.
31 OE isern appears in Beowulf in the compounds isernbyrne ‘iron mail-coat’ (671) and isernscur ‘iron shower (of arrows)’ (3116), the latter in the context of burning coals and flame. The commoner form of the word in the poem as it has comes down to us is ire(n), however.
32 See also A. G. Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley, 1959), 21: ‘hildegicel ... was evoked by an imagination working in a manner resembling the processes of thought behind the skaldic kenning diguljökull, “ice of the crucible,” for the concept “silver.” As silver melts in the crucible, so ice melts in the sun. In hildegicel the thought is similar, but it is not concealed and strained as in the skaldic kenning; it is visualized and communicated in a clear and lovely image.’
33 Anderson, Understanding Beowulf, 262.
34 Anderson, Understanding Beowulf, 260.
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gelicost, more like ice than any other object in the world could be, because no other sword-blade ever melted into a multiplicity of icicle-like strands.\textsuperscript{35}

Anderson also observes that ‘preternatural fire and icicles are apt images of hell’, and relates the sword’s melting to God’s release of waters in springtime.\textsuperscript{36} In turn, he sees an ‘exact’ parallel in Indra’s freeing of the world’s waters by slaying the snake Vṛtra in Indian myth.\textsuperscript{37} On this last basis ‘the simile opens the text [i.e., Beowulf] to a world of dragon-slaying myths’.\textsuperscript{38}

Most recently, the authors of the Dictionary of Old English declare that hildegicelum refers to ‘drops of blood dripping from a sword’.\textsuperscript{39} But although this could be part of what the image evokes, it is not, I think, its focus, as the poet emphasizes that ‘it was a great wonder’ that the sword melted ‘just like ice’. In other words, the icicles were not principally drops of congealing monster-blood dripping from the blade—a sight which would not be especially noteworthy.

Although all these scholars have made useful observations, in my view there is much more to say about this image. In the rest of this chapter I highlight the image’s distinctiveness by comparison with ostensibly similar descriptions of ice- and icicle-swords in Old Norse texts. In Chapters 3 and 4 I go on to argue that the image may have important implications for the interpretation of Beowulf from a religious perspective, specifically with regard to symbols of Easter.

Old Norse Ice-Swords

To my knowledge, surviving Anglo-Saxon records contain only one image markedly comparable to that of the melting giant sword in Beowulf. However, as even this parallel in the Old English poem Andreas makes no reference to ice, I reserve it for the next chapter. Nor do we find sword-melting imagery in the many Old Norse analogues to Beowulf that scholars have adduced.

\textsuperscript{35} Anderson, \textit{Understanding Beowulf}, 262.
\textsuperscript{36} Anderson, \textit{Understanding Beowulf}, 262–3.
\textsuperscript{37} Anderson, \textit{Understanding Beowulf}, 263. See also my Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{38} Anderson, \textit{Understanding Beowulf}, 263.
\textsuperscript{39} DOE s.v. hilde-gicel.
What we do find, in Old Norse skaldic poems, is a frequent likening of swords to ice, and sometimes icicles, given their obvious similarity in terms of coldness, sharpness and shape. Numerous examples follow, some of which were reportedly spoken on English soil, though all centuries later than a seventh- or eighth-century Beowulf. Significantly, despite some interesting similarities, they appear most helpful for the appreciation of the image of the melting giant sword because of their differences from it. They serve to highlight in considerable number, through contrast, the uniqueness of the Old English image, which strictly speaking concerns not an ice- or icicle-sword, but a sword that melts into icicle-like strands of semi-molten iron.

The Icelander Vígfúss Víga-Glúmsson (b. c. 955) called a sword þunníss Gunnar ‘slender ice of Gunnr [a valkyrie]’. For Hallvarðr Háreksblesi, an Icelandic skald (poet) at the court of King Knútr (Canute), a sword was sikulgjarðar iss ‘ice of the sword-belt/baldric’. A verse attributed to Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 refers to Hlakkar iss ‘ice of Hlókk [a valkyrie]’. In the thirteenth-century saga that bears his name, the Icelander Gísli Súrsson envisions himself brandishing a hjaldríss ‘battle-ice’, a term that bears some resemblance to OE hildegicelum.

Unsurprisingly, Old Norse ‘ice-swords’, like any other type of sword, may be bloody, as was the giant sword when it melted. Thus, in the twelfth-century, Kolli inn prúði declared Lýsa munk, hvé ljósa /—laut hrafn i ben Gauta—/ … sárísa rauð vísi ‘I shall describe how … the ruler reddened bright wound-icicles—the raven bent over the wounds of the Gautar [i.e., the Geatas of Beowulf]’. Similarly, in a verse attributed to the eleventh-century Icelander Sigvatr Þórólfarson a warrior is called an iss gunnrjóðr ‘war-reddener of ice’. An anonymous stanza describing

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40 R. Meissner, Die Kenningar der Skalden: ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik (Bonn, 1921), 151–2.
41 D. Whaley (ed.), Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1, SPSMA 1 (Turnhout, 2012), 363. Translations from Old Norse texts are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
42 SnESkáld, I, 93.
43 K. E. Gade (ed.), Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2, SPSMA 2 (Turnhout, 2009), 55.
44 Björn K. Pórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (ed.), Vestfirðinga sögur, IF 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), 93.
45 Gade, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2, 530–1.
46 Whaley, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1, 705–6.
an attack by King Knútr and his forces on London refers to the clanging of the blóðiss ‘blood-ice’.\footnote{Whaley, \textit{Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas} 1, 1025.}

Skaldic designations of swords as specifically jǫklar ‘icicles’ or ‘glaciers’ (cognate with OE -gicelum) include one by Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson, a jarl of Orkney in the twelfth century, who described swords as bǫðvar jǫklar ‘battle’s icicles/glaciers’.\footnote{Gade, \textit{Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas} 2, 590. Gade translates ‘glaciers of battle’.} In the twelfth or thirteenth century, the Icelander Haukr Valdísarson identified blood as the sárjökuls geimi ‘sea of the wound-glacier/ice/icicle’.\footnote{T. Möbius (ed.), \textit{Islendingadráp Hauks Valdisarsonar: ein isländisches gedicht des XIII. Jahrhunderts} (Kiel, 1874), 7, 38.} A stanza quoted in the final part of Snorri’s thirteenth-century \textit{Prose Edda} features a cluster of images of ice-swords steeped in a sea of blood, including a reference to swords as styrjǫklar ‘battle-glaciers/icicles’:

\begin{quote}
Álmdróðar skylr ísa  
ár flest meginbára sára,  
könn lætr hræ[s] á hrónnnum  
hjálmsvell jǫfurr gella fella;  
styrjǫkla kná stiklir,  
stinn, mens legi venja benja,  
lætr stillir frár fylla  
\end{quote}

The mighty wave of wounds [BLOOD] washes nearly every year the bow-woman’s ice [VALKYRIE > SWORD]. The clever prince lets the helmet-floe [SWORD] resound hard on the fellers’ waves [SWORDS > BLOOD]. The necklace-thrower [GENEROUS PRINCE] does accustom battle-glaciers/ icicles [SWORDS] to the wound-sea, the swift ruler lets the sword-woods’ [WARRIORS’] wound-sound [BLOOD] fill the stiff swords.\footnote{Adapted from A. Faulkes (trans.), \textit{Snorri Sturluson: Edda} (Oxford, 1987), 201.}

Hertha Marquardt suggested that the association of a sword with icicles in \textit{Beowulf}, taken together with the Old Norse parallels, might reflect an ancient Germanic sword-kenning more widely attested in Norse tradition.\footnote{H. Marquardt, \textit{Die altenglischen Kenningar: ein Beitrag zur Stilkunde altgermanischer Dichtung} (Halle, 1938), 12.} Rudolf Meissner, however, thought the similarity with
skaldic imagery purely fortuitous. For her part, Roberta Frank detects here and elsewhere in Beowulf ‘echoes of skaldic diction’, but ‘heard at a great distance, from outside the [skaldic] tradition, and recorded to supply a touch of Scandinavian color, to capture the flavor of the sixth-century Danish society described.’ But whatever the explanation of the similarities (to the extent that they are seen), a key difference stands out. Rather surprisingly, in none of the many Old Norse references to ice-swords I have found does such a weapon melt like an icicle or ice. Instead, Old Norse ice-swords may shatter, as in the twelfth-century Icelander Einarr Skúlason’s phrase folks brustu svell ‘the ice-sheets of battle [swords] burst’. This key difference serves to underline the Beowulf-poet’s assertion that ‘it was a great wonder’ that the giant sword melted like ice.

To comprehend more fully the image of the melting of the giant sword’s blade, I believe we must appreciate another intimated parallel. It is one that finds corroboration in medieval Norse and Irish texts, but seems to have been overlooked by scholars in connection with the giant sword. It is between a sword and a wax candle.

55 Gade, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2, 554–5. There are also descriptions of Norse sword-blades breaking ‘under the hilt’, for which see H. Falk, Altnordische Waffenkunde (Kristiania, 1914), 18.