The Waning Sword
Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in *Beowulf*

Edward Pettit
3. The Giant Sword and the Candle

If no other sword in old Germanic literature melts like ice, an image found immediately after the giant sword beheads Grendel’s mother and shortly before its blade melts encourages perception of another analogy. The blade’s distinctive waning *hildgeicelum* ‘with/into battle-icicles’ subtly invites correlation with *rodores candel* ‘the sky’s candle’ (1572) because, it seems to me, the object most likely to have been identified metaphorically with melting icicles was a burning candle.¹ Admittedly, to my knowledge, Anglo-Saxon records contain no other instances of such an analogy, but given its specificity this is not surprising, and the basis for the comparison is obvious. When a wax candle is lit, icicle-like strands of molten wax—‘waxicles’, if you will—start growing downwards from its tip. Secondly, a traditional beeswax candle is itself white, elongated (perhaps tapered) and cool (except when lit), not unlike an icicle.² In addition, both a lit candle and an icicle are liable to burn those who touch them.

Although I have found no explicit or strongly implicit comparisons of swords to candles in other Anglo-Saxon texts, a passage from the Old English poem *Andreas* catches the eye. In this poem, from the tenth-century *Vercelli Book*, God saves a boy from death at the hands of monstrous heathens by commanding their swords to melt ‘just like wax’. Scholars have detected enough verbal and thematic similarities between *Andreas* and *Beowulf* to indicate a close link between the two

¹ See further the discussion of this solar image later in the present chapter.
² With the *Beowulf*-poet’s use of OE *waman* ‘to wane’ to describe the sword’s diminution (1607), compare the use of the verb’s Middle English descendant in connection with a burning candle: see *OED* s.v. ‘wane’ v. 1.1 (c. 1290); *MED* s.v. *wanen* 1 (a) (first entry).
Especially if, as seems likely, *Andreas* was influenced by *Beowulf*, the simile, which I quote in context below, offers encouragement for the suggestion that the giant sword melted not just like icicles but also like wax:

Hine God forstod,
halig of hehðo,   hæðenan folce;
het wæpen wera   wexe gelicost
on þam orlege   eall formeltan,
þy læs scyldhatan   sceððan mihton,
egle ondsacan,   ecga þryðum.
Swa wearð alysed   of leodhete,
geong of gyrne. (1143–50)

God stood up for him, holy from on high, against the heathen folk; he commanded the men’s weapons all to entirely melt just like wax in that strife, lest the unjust oppressors/shield-haters, terrible adversaries, might harm (him) with the powers of edges/swords. Thus he became freed from people-hate, the young one from injury.

Irish and Norse texts certainly do attest to the medieval currency of the image of a sword as a candle. This analogy also has an obvious basis: both sword and candle are long and slender; a candle may taper, as does a sword at its tip; both shine when in use; both are dangerous to touch at the tip; and both are carried in the hand by a handle, potentially ornate. As with the Old Norse instances of ice-swords, however, the following examples of ‘candle-swords’ all postdate a seventh- or eighth-century *Beowulf*.

Medieval Irish tradition tells of the marvellous sword *Caladbolg* ‘Hard Cleft(?)’, described in the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* in the twelfth-century

---

5 Their likeness may even extend to an element of their composition, if, then as now, sword-blades or scabbards were sometimes coated in wax or tallow to prevent rust. A sword belonging to Charlemagne was protected by a scabbard, leather and white linen strengthened with *cera lucidissima* ‘clearest wax’; see SASE, 93, 113.
Book of Leinster as shining like a chaindil ... lassamain ‘blazing candle’.  
Similarly, another Irish tale, possibly composed before the mid-twelfth century,7 describes how the gold-hilted sword Cruaidin Coiditcheann ‘Hard-Headed Steeling’—a treasured heirloom that belonged to the supernaturally hot hero Cú Chulainn—rothaitnidh ‘sin aidhchi amal coindill ‘shone at night like a candle’.  
Like OE candel ‘candle’, the medieval Irish word caindel ‘candle’ derives from Latin candela; it is a noun derived from Christian ritual.

Surviving candle-sword parallels in Old Norse texts appear more numerous and especially interesting.9 The thirteenth-century Orkneyinga saga ‘Saga of the Men of Orkney’ records that an Icelandic skald received as a gift it bezta blóðkerti ‘the best blood-candle’, which was glæst med gulli ‘bright with gold’;10 the surrounding prose identifies this gift as a spear, but the kenning would more normally describe a sword.11 Here kerti ‘candle’ probably derives ultimately from Latin charta ‘papyrus’,12 in which case it is probably not a word from the Common Germanic, pre-Christian lexicon.

In the twelfth-century, probably Orcadian poem Krákumál ‘Crow’s Words’, Ragnarr Lóðbrók, while dying in the snake-pit of the ninth-century King Ælla of Northumbria, recites a poem in which he describes a sword as a rækyndill ‘corpse-candle’.13 Here kyndill ‘candle’ derives, perhaps with influence from OE candel, from Latin candela.14

Again, a stanza from the twelfth-century Orcadian poem Háttalykill ‘Key to Metres’ includes the terms hjaldrkyndill ‘battle-candle’ and hildar kerti ‘taper/candle of battle’, both of which are ‘sword’-kennings:

---

6 C. O’Rahilly (ed.), Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster (Dublin, 1970), 130, 266. The same sword may have been used by a lone hero to kill a water-monster in its lair; see D. A. Binchy, ‘The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti’, Ériu 16 (1952), 33–48.
9 See Meissner, Die Kenningar der Skalden, 151.
10 Gade, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2, 620.
11 Gade, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2, 621; cf. Meissner, Kenningar, 146; LP s.v. blóðkerti.
12 ANEW s.v. kerti 1; ÍO s.v. kerti 1.
14 ANEW s.v. kyndill.
The battle-candle [SWORD]—a hard firebrand is that—bit the walls of battle [SHIELDS]; the light of the blow—I call the sword thus—had to yell in skulls. The hard taper of battle [SWORD]—the helmet’s ruin is that—sheared shield(-rim)s; because the wound-flame [SWORD] bit the mail-coat, I named it thus: ‘Cutter’.

Here hjaldr- ‘battle’ is synonymous with OE hilde- ‘battle’ in Beowulf’s hildegícelum. Its alliterative partner, hildar ‘battle’ (genitive of hildr), is cognate with OE hilde-. It is also of interest that, in this stanza, at least the second instance of hildar could also be interpreted as Hildar ‘of Hildr’. The fiery candle-sword would then belong to the valkyrie Hildr (compare the synonymous valkyrie-names Gunnr and Hlǫkk in the ‘ice-sword’ kennings quoted in Chapter 2). Some scholars detect characteristics of an early, unromanticized valkyrie in Grendel’s mother, in whose proximity Beowulf acquired the giant sword.  

Most interesting of all, however, is another medieval Norse text in which a candle-sword—another ‘corpse-candle’—appears in the possession of a supernatural female who appears comparable in many respects to Grendel’s mother. Parallels between the two texts raise the possibility, even likelihood, of a significant link between this candle-sword and the giant sword. They merit close examination as they seem not to have been noticed before.

---

15 Adapted from PTP, 1077.
Vargeisa’s Candle-Sword

In its surviving form *Hjálmpérs saga* probably dates from the fifteenth century. Some of its stanzas may be older, though, and comparison with the late fourteenth-century Icelandic poems known as *Hjálmpérs rimur* ‘Hjálmpérs Rhymes’ suggests the existence of an earlier form of the story ‘probably composed around 1300’. The saga may, of course, contain traditions even earlier than that, whether transmitted through oral tradition or writing. The following paragraphs summarize relevant aspects of Hjálmpérs story, based mainly on the saga.

The tale begins by introducing the parents of the eponymous hero, who appears comparable to Beowulf. Hjálmpérs father was a famous king called Ingi—probably a late manifestation of a certain Ing(v)i who is a highly important character for this study.

Of Ingi we learn that:

Hann var vel búinn maðr at öllum íþróttum, meiri ok mektugri, vænni ok vitrari, stærri ok sterkari en hverr annarr maðr í veröldinni honum samtíða. Hann lá í hernaði fyrra hlut ævi sinnar ok vann undir sik mörg konungaríki [ok voru honum skattgildir]. Hann átti at ráða fyrir Mannheimum, hvert er var öllum ländum meira ok gagnauðgra.

He was a well-appointed man in all accomplishments, (being) greater and mightier, handsomer and wiser, bigger and stronger than every other man in the world at the same time as him. He pursued raids for the earlier

---


19 At the end of the saga, Hjálmpér also names his elder son Ingi.

20 *FSN*, IV, 179, with the bracketed text taken from Rafn, *Fornaldar sögur*, III, 453 n. 1. For other late references to Ingi, see Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Fernir forníslenksir rímaflókkar* (Copenhagen, 1896), 43–59 (*Völusprír: A New English Translation with Commentary and Analysis* (unpublished masters thesis, University of Iceland, 2015), where he is a son of Óðinn. Also, for Ingi as a king of Constantinople in violent pursuit of a queen, see S. McDonald, ‘Nítíða saga: A Normalised Icelandic Text and Translation’, *LSE* 40 (2009), 119–45.
part of his life and subjugated to himself many kingdoms [and there were tribute-payments to him]. He had command over Mannheimar ‘Man-Homes/Worlds’,\(^{21}\) where it was greater and more productive than all (other) lands.

Ingi’s queen was a gifted woman called Marsibil ‘Sea-Sibyl’, daughter of the king of Syria. To Ingi and his wife a son was born: Hjálmpér ‘Helmet-Servant’. He was big, strong and handsome, the most accomplished of men from a young age. He became friends with Ölvir, the supremely accomplished son of an earl, the king’s best friend.\(^{22}\) They became sworn brothers after a tournament in which Hjálmpér had rampaged *sem björn í sauðaduni* ‘like a bear amid a flock of sheep’.\(^{23}\)

Marsibil died and Ingi grieved for her day and night, until one day a ship arrived over the sea bearing two people. One was an extraordinary beautiful woman called Lúða ‘She of the Mill-(Frame)/Whirlpool’.\(^{24}\) She is later revealed to be a giantess, or at least a giant’s sister. Ingi promptly married her in Hjálmpér’s absence, but people considered her haughty and self-willed. They also wondered why a man soon began to disappear from their number each night.\(^{25}\)

Hjálmpér and Ölvir went on viking raids, during which the former killed two mighty foes, the brothers Koll and Toki. While fighting on a ship, Hjálmpér severed Toki’s arm, whereupon Toki dived into the sea. Hjálmpér pursued him and they wrestled underwater for a long time, with each dragging the other to the bottom, until loss of blood sapped Toki’s strength and Hjálmpér left him for dead. Hjálmpér than swam back to his ships, to the delight of his men. He considered he had returned *úr helju* ‘from Hel/the dead’.\(^{26}\)

Later, after other adventures, Hjálmpér rejected his stepmother’s sexual advances, whereupon she sank into the earth, whence she had

\(^{21}\) O’Connor, *Icelandic Histories*, 182 observes that this name was ‘[t]aken to mean “Sweden” by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Swedish editors, but not necessarily by Icelandic saga-authors’. In the *rímur* Ingi rules over Denmark.

\(^{22}\) The two appear largely equivalent, almost doubles—like the swords they acquire.

\(^{23}\) Rafn, *Fornaldar sögur*, III, 455 n. 1. Cf. the name *Beowulf* interpreted as ‘bee-wolf’, i.e., ‘bear’.

\(^{24}\) This, at least, is my interpretation of her name, the significance of which will become apparent later in this study when we meet other mill-(frame)/whirlpool-giantesses.

\(^{25}\) They were taken by the sexual predator Lúða. Cf. the nocturnal seizure of a single man, Æschere, by Grendel’s mother.

\(^{26}\) *FSN*, IV, 188; Rafn, *Fornaldar sögur*, III, 463. C. N. Gould, ‘The Source of an Interpolation in the Hjálmtérs Saga ok Ölvis’, *MP* 7 (1909), 207–16 argues that these viking-incidents are interpolated. Hjálmpér’s fight with Toki shows similarities to the young *Beowulf*’s battles with water-monsters and with Grendel.
come. Hjálmþér and Ölvir then went hunting and pursued a large, beautiful hind.27 The chase led them to a cave in which a giant was sitting by a fire,28 where he was combed by a female creature called Skinnhúfa ‘Skin-Hood’.29 The giant told her to go out and listen for the men that his sister (Lúða) had promised would arrive that evening. Skinnhúfa turned the two visitors into chickens,30 and lied about their presence to the giant, before returning them to human form once the giant was asleep. Hjálmþér said he wanted to kill the giant, and they proceeded further into the cave. There a gold-adorned sword hung over the giant’s bed. Skinnhúfa said it was the only sword that could harm him. When Hjálmþér reached for the sword it slipped from its scabbard, but Skinnhúfa caught it in her hand. Hjálmþér then drove the sword through the sleeping giant, who leapt up and groped around before dying. Hjálmþér then took the sword, but Skinnhúfa objected, saying that Ölvir should rather have it.31 She did, however, strongly hint that Hjálmþér would find a better sword, one that would surpass all others. She then gave them many rare treasures and told them to call on her if they should need help in future.

Next, in chapter 10, comes the episode in which Hjálmþér acquires the peerless sword.32

27 Cf. the stag-hunt in Beowulf, discussed in Chapter 10.
28 He is unnamed in the saga’s prose, but one of its verses later identifies him as Bendill ‘Little Band/Bond’, or perhaps Beli (one manuscript has dative singular Belu), a giant we shall encounter later in this study; see Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 537. In the rímur the giant is called principally Skrimnir, a name to which I return in Chapter 14; see Finnur Jónsson, Rímnasafni, II, 13, 16; Sir W. A. Craigie, Specimens of Icelandic Rimur from the Fourteenth to the Nineteenth Century 3 vols (London, 1952), I, 82.
29 In the rímur she is a troll-woman who brandishes a sax ‘short sword/long knife’, a sara vǫndr ‘wand of wounds’—like Grendel’s mother with her seax; Finnur Jónsson, Rímnasafni, II, 15; Craigie, Specimens, I, 85. The following episode also shows similarities to the classical myth of Odysseus and the cyclops Polyphemus, which may have originated as a myth of the solar eclipse; see E. G. Suhr, ‘An Interpretation of the Medusa’, Folklore 76 (1965), 90–103 at 101–2.
30 An indication of the saga-author’s humour; in the rímur, the men become hawks.
31 In the rímur it is Ólfrir who stabs the giant in the heart with the blade of a sword described as enn itra brand ‘the glorious firebrand’, unda nadren uæna ‘the fair adder of wounds’ and unda nadren biarta ‘the bright adder of wounds’; Finnur Jónsson, Rímnasafni, II, 15; Craigie, Specimens, I, 85.
Hjálmþér and Ölvir set off raiding again. One late autumn evening they came to a wooded island. That night Hjálmþér heard a great noise. Out of the forest came a large and brawny female monster, a finngálkn.\(^{33}\) She had a horse’s tail, hooves and mane, white eyes, a large mouth and long arms. In her hand she had a brand … vænan ‘handsome firebrand/sword’, such that Hjálmþér had never seen the like. He addressed her in verse:

‘Hver er sú dóttir, er drjúgt um nætr 
flanar ok flöktir með ðils hala?
Ólík þykki mér þú öðrum vífum,
eða hvaðan komt, Hrauðungs mær?’\(^{34}\)

‘Who’s that daughter who by nights rushes heedlessly (so) much and flies about(?) with an elephant’s tail? You seem to me unlike other women, and whence have you come, Hrauðungr’s girl?’

She replied with another stanza:

‘Vargeisa ek heiti. Heyr þú, vísis [v.l. hilmis] son, 
viltu, at ek þér i sinni sé? 
Allra þinna telk þik þurfa munu 
vel [v.l. mun vil] trúra vina.’\(^{35}\)

‘I’m called Vargeisa. Listen, leader’s son—do you wish that I should be on your side/in your company? I reckon you’ll certainly need all of your true friends.’


\(^{34}\) FSN, IV, 198; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, III, 474; Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 495.

\(^{35}\) FSN, IV, 198–9. Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, III, 474; Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 497.
He answered:

‘Hraedilig muntu þykkja þolda liði,
þótt þú oss í sinni sér.
Engan várn seggja þú svíkja munt,
vösk vinkona, Vör hin hardleita.’

‘You’ll seem dreadful to my band of men, even if you help us. You’ll betray none of our men, O valiant female friend, hard-looking Vör [i.e., goddess].’

She confirmed his confidence in her, and said she could help even if she did not come with him. Their conversation then turned to the subject of the sword she carried:

Hann mælti: ‘Áttu brand þann, er þú ferr með?’

‘At vísu,’ segir hún.

‘Viltu selja mér hann?’ segir hann.

‘Með engu móti,’ segir hún.

‘Skal ek með engu móti fá hann?’ segir Hjálmþér.

‘Ekki skal þat þó, karlmaðr,’ segir hún, ‘þú skalt kyssa mik,’ segir hún, ok varð henni ljóð at munni:

‘Sæk þú Snarvendil, sigr mun honum fylgja,
horskr, ef þú, hilmir, vilt þér í hendi bera.
Koss vil ek af þér klénan þiggja,
þá muntu Mímung mér ór hendi fá.’

He said: ‘Do you own that firebrand [i.e., sword] that you go around with?’

‘Certainly,’ she says.

‘Will you give me it?’ he says.

‘By no means,’ she says.

‘Shall I by no means get it?’ says Hjálmþér.

---

36 FSN, IV, 199; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, III, 474; Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 497–8.
37 FSN, IV, 199–200; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, III, 475; Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 498–9.
The Waning Sword

‘It shan’t be (the case that you’ll get it) unless, valiant man’, she says, ‘you shall kiss me,’ she says, and a verse came to her mouth:

‘Seek/take Snarvendill — victory will accompany it — wise one, if you, prince, want to bear it in your hand. I want to receive a nice kiss from you — then you will receive Mínumgr/the sword from my hand.’

Afraid he would stick to her snout if he kissed her, Hjálmþér turned away. He changed his mind, though, when he remembered what Skinnhúfa had told him. He then addressed another stanza to Vargeisa, who was apparently playing with her sword:

‘Kanntu mjúkligar,  mær in harðleita,  en höldar aðrir sex.
Sel þú mér sárloga  sveiptan ormstýnu;
þú þarf ek fljóð at kyssa, fær sem má jöfri.’

‘You, hard-looking girl, know how to play with the corpse-candle [SWORD] more strongly than six other men. Give me the wound-flame [SWORD] wrapped in a snake’s eiderdown [GOLD/VAGINA]; I’m eager to kiss the woman, go as it may for the prince.’

She replied:

‘Pá verðr þú at hlaupa á háls mér, í því ek kasta upp brandinum, en ef þú efar þik [v.l. á þik kemr], þá er þat þinn bani.’

Hún kastar nú upp sverðinu. Í því hleypr hann á háls henni ok kyssti hana, en hún henti sverðit fyrir aptan bak honum. Hún réttir nú at honum brandinn ok kvað vísu:

‘Sel ek þér Snarvendil,  sigr mun honum fylgja,  um þína aldrdaga;
þú þarf þín ævi æ  til sigrs ok gefu,  þurur þú heim kannar,  hugr er í konungs barni.’

‘Then you must leap on my neck at the instant I throw up the firebrand [SWORD], but if you hesitate [v.l. it hits you], then that will be your death.’

---

38 FSN, IV, 200; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, III, 475; Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 499–500.
39 FSN, IV, 200–1; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, III, 476; Clunies Ross, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, 501.
Now she throws up the sword. At that instant he leaps on her neck and he kissed her, and she caught the sword in her hand(s) behind his back. She now hands the firebrand to him and spoke a verse:

‘I give you Snarvendill—victory will accompany it—O strong-minded boar [i.e., warrior]—throughout your life-days; your life will always turn to victory and good luck, wherever you know [i.e., have] your home—there’s courage in the king’s son.’

Later we learn that this sword is a dvergasmíði ‘work of dwarves’.40 Also, the implicit radiance of this ‘corpse-candle’ becomes explicit: lýsti af honum sem ljósi ‘it shone like a light’.41

Significantly, too, in the saga’s final chapter we discover that Vargeisa was originally a beautiful princess called Álsól (or probably better, I think, Alsól) ‘All-Sun’42 or Álf sól ‘Elf-Sun’, whom Hjálmtýr marries.43 Lúða, it turns out, had transformed her into a finngálkn and then given her Snarvendill, whereupon Var hún hann at henda ýmist með munni eða höndum ‘She [Vargeisa] busied herself handling it variously with her mouth or hands’.44 This curious detail is inexplicit in the prior description of Hjálmtýr’s encounter with her, but implicit in Hjálmtýr’s reference to Vargeisa playing so vigorously with the blazing sword wrapped in the ‘snake’s eiderdown’; this is a double entendre suggesting both that the sword is covered with gold (i.e., golden-hilted) and that Vargeisa is using it enthusiastically as a dildo, her vagina being in effect her lower mouth.45 In the rimur, Vargeisa’s peculiar handling of the sword was explicit at the time, but without the sexual aspect: hrotti fleygir hatt aa loptt / ok hendir suerð med munne ‘she throws Hrotti/the sword high into

40 FSN, IV, 209. Throughout, I use the plural spelling ‘dwarves’ for the mythological creatures, which is in common popular (if not scholarly) use, rather than ‘dwarfs’.
41 FSN, IV, 229.
42 FSN, IV, 240–2.
44 FSN, IV, 241.
45 The sexual connotation is corroborated by a subsequent encounter between Hjálmtýr and a troll-woman called Ýma (see Chapter 7). For the concepts of the vagina as a hole for a firebrand and as a ‘nether mouth’, sometimes of a toothed beast such as a wolf (a vagina dentata), see M. Morton, The Lover’s Tongue: A Merry Romp through the Language of Love and Sex (Toronto, 2003), 141–2; D. Williams, Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature (Exeter, 1996), 164–8.
the air and catches the sword with her mouth'. 46 Additionally, from the rímur it appears that Hjálmþér took the sword from her mouth:

\[
\text{Tigge geck at trionv uargs} \\
\text{ok tok uid sara uendi,} \\
\text{sidan kysti hann suediv biargs,} \\
\text{suerd er grams i hendi.} 47
\]

The 'king' [i.e., Hjálmþér] went to the snout of the outlaw/thief/wolf and received [or 'took therefrom'?] the wand of wounds [SWORD]; after he kissed the suediv of the rock [GIANTESS], 48 the sword is in the warrior's hand. 49

By kissing Vargeisa, Hjálmþér had broken the spell over Ál(f)sól. From the saga we also learn that Lúða had transformed Ál(f)sól’s sister, Hildisíf, into Skinnhúfa. Hjálmþér had broken the spell over Hildisíf by killing Lúða’s brother, the cave-dwelling giant, with the sword that hung over the giant’s bed.

In this saga the golden-hilted ‘corpse-candle’ 50 received by Hjálmþér from Vargeisa (who acquired it from Ingi’s wife, Lúða) is another

---

46 Finnur Jónsson, Rímnasaður, II, 21. Whether Hrotti is a proper noun or a common noun here is uncertain, but if Snarvendill is also called Hrotti, the likely Old Norse equivalent of OE Hrunting, this could be most significant, as we shall see. The rímur also provide further details about Snarvendill: it is sett med orma stræte ‘set with streets of snakes’; its edge is i snaka eitre herda ‘hardened in the poison of snakes’ (compare Hrotti as the sword of the monstrous snake Fáfnir in the concluding prose to the Eddic poem Fáfnismál ‘Fáfnir’s Sayings’); it is uænna ‘more beautiful’ than any other sword i þessum heime ‘in this world’; laugud egg i linna ferd / ok lyst med grædis eime ‘its edge bathes in the journey of snakes [i.e., sea? scabbard? snakes’ poisonous trails?] and shines with fire of the sea [i.e., gold]’; it is a Biartann … brand ‘bright firebrand’; ibid., 22–3, 70.

47 Finnur Jónsson, Rímnasaður, II, 23.

48 So Finnur Jónsson, Ordbo og de af Samfund til udg. ad gml. nord. litteratur udgivne rímur samt de af Dr. O. Jiriczek udgivne Bóasarímur (Copenhagen, 1926–8), s.v. sveðja.

49 Vargeisa is not the only ‘wolf’ to have a sword in its mouth in Norse mythology. When the monstrous wolf Fenrir gaped mightily at the gods, they propped its jaws open sverði nokkvoru ‘with a certain sword’ (SnEGylf, 29). This sword is neither named nor described, but could well be solar (see Chapter 10).

50 Cf., in the rímur, Hialmþer bregdr hræfa teini ‘Hjálmþér draws the twig of corpses’; Finnur Jónsson, Rímnasaður, II, 44. The candle-sword is apparently therefore also a ‘twig-sword’, an important concept which we shall encounter more than once over the course of this study. That the notion of a twig-sword—or at least a wooden sword—was more than metaphorical, and that a such a sword might be radiant is probably shown by a sixth- or seventh-century wooden, rune-inscribed sword from Arum, West Frisia, which has a burnt tip; SASE5-7, 325. There is also the testimony of an Old English prose remedy wið fleogendan attre ‘for flying poison’, part of the
candle-sword to compare with (in my view) Beowulf’s golden-hilted giant sword, although, unlike that sword, it does not melt. The saga’s sword apparently has two names: Snarvendill and Mímungr (unless the latter word is used rather as a common noun for ‘sword’). Neither of these names appear in Beowulf, but the first possibly identifies it as a Danish weapon: snarr ‘hard-twisted’, ‘swift’ or ‘penetrating’ + Vendill ‘Vandil, a local name, the northern part of Jutland’.51 Mímungr, for its part, was a famous sword of Germanic legend, one known to Old English heroic tradition,52 and to which we shall return in connection with the giant sword.

Other similarities exist between Snarvendill and the giant sword. Snarvendill was made by dwarves, rather as the giant sword was forged by giants—despite their different statures, giants and dwarves are akin in Old Norse mythology and share certain attributes.53 More importantly, the circumstances surrounding the swords’ acquisition...
look similar. Hjálmþér acquired his sword from Vargeisa, a monstrous female, after an extremely dangerous, albeit amorous, physical encounter in which he had to jump on her neck, which presumably means her shoulders. This encounter involved the sword in a form of play (leika), in which Vargeisa apparently transferred the weapon between her hands and mouth. This transference does not find clear parallel in Beowulf, but Beowulf did acquire the giant sword soon after being carried by Grendel’s heorogifre ‘sword-greedy’ mother (1498)—below and in Chapter 15 I examine the possibility that she is a sword-swallow—possibly across her shoulder (Bær þa seo brimwyl[fl] ... hringa þengel ‘Then the sea-she-wolf bore the prince of rings’, 1506–7). He then seized her by the shoulder (Gefeng þa be eaxle 1537). This move was part of an encounter in which wrestling imagery, with sexual overtones, continues to its climax, when hire wið halse heard grapode ‘it [i.e., the giant sword]/he gripped her hard by the neck’ (1566), a wording that imagines the giant sword’s blade as an extension of, or a companion to, Beowulf’s wrestling arm. Moreover, the giant sword is described as being carried into beadulace ‘battle-play’ (1561), a word, used only here in Beowulf, in which the noun lac ‘play’ is cognate with the Old Norse verb leika. It may well also be significant that both swords have a ‘double’ that the hero gives to another man after using it successfully. In the saga, the unnamed sword with which Hjálmþér killed the sleeping giant also corresponds to Beowulf’s unnamed giant sword; it is then given to Ölvir. In Beowulf the sword with which (it seems likely) the hero killed the grasping sea-monster during his swimming match with Breca (555–8) foreshadows the giant sword, but is then entrusted to Unferð, Hroðgar’s spokesman.

The two female monsters also have much in common, as I shall now show. This is despite the fact that Vargeisa is essentially friendly (though potentially deadly) to Hjálmþér, whereas Grendel’s mother is implacably hostile to Beowulf throughout their encounter (though she voluntarily brings him into her home).

54 Although eaxle ‘shoulder’ is here possibly a corruption of feaxe ‘hair’.
56 Similarly, the former sword appears implicitly equated with Beowulf’s hand: orde, hildebille ... fornam ... purh mine hand ‘with point, with battle-bill ... carried off ... through my hand’ (556–8).
Vargeisa very probably means ‘Thief/Outlaw/Wolf-Embers’. Assuming this unique name encapsulates the essence of its bearer, it indicates an outlawed and latently hot female creature who, in addition to having explicit equine and elephantine attributes, may well be to some extent lupine. Vargeisa’s latent heat may well have resided in her blood, especially as blood was imagined by one tenth-century Icelandic poet as *glóðheitr sveiti* ‘gleed-hot sweat’. If it did, Vargeisa may have shared this characteristic with Grendel’s mother, assuming the latter conferred this property on her excessively hot-blooded son. Similarly, too, Grendel’s mother, like her son, was an outlaw, an exile from God. The two Old English monsters also have lupine associations, as Grendel’s mother is a *brimwylf* ‘sea-she-wolf’ (1506, 1599), and she and her son occupied *wulfhleoþu* ‘wolf-slopes’ (1358). Furthermore, both Vargeisa and Grendel’s mother may well have been sword-thieves.

---


58 Gade, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas* 2, 268.

59 At least some Norse giantesses were internally fiery, as shown by their flaming breath or eyes; see M. Puhvel, ‘The Mighty She-Trolls of Icelandic Saga and Folk-Tale’, *Folklore* 98 (1987), 175–9 at 176–7; T. Gunnell, ‘Grýla, Grýlur, “Grøleks” and Skeklers: Medieval Disguise Traditions in the North Atlantic?’, *Arv* 57 (2001), 33–54 at 46. See also my discussion of the troll-woman Ýma in Chapter 7.

60 This instance is an emendation of *brimwylf*.

61 As such, Grendel’s mother is probably related to *ylgrin* ‘the she-wolf’ which Bǫðvarr Bjarki (a Beowulf-analogue) fatally strikes in the fifteenth-century *Bjarkarímur* ‘Bjárki’s Rhymes’, and from which *ferligt blóð* ‘monstrous blood’ flowed; see Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Hrófís saga kraka og Bjarkarímur* (Copenhagen, 1904), 139–40; cf. J. McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, 2005), 132–3. Newton, *Origins*, 143–4 proposes a link between Grendel and *Shuck* (from OE *scucca* ‘devil’, a word found in *Beowulf* 939) or the phantom ‘Black Dog’ of folklore, on which see also T. Brown, ‘The Black Dog’, *Folklore* 69 (1958), 175–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.1958.9717142. For more connections between Norse giants, giantesses, troll-women and wolves, see Chapter 7 n. 33, Chapter 14 (on
Vargeisa is not said to have stolen her sword, which she received from Lúða. However, Hjálmþér questions her ownership of it, and her reply is perhaps too emphatically affirmative to convince. Given Lúða’s utterly evil character, we may wonder whether Vargeisa was in receipt of a sword that had been stolen—from Ingi? More clearly, Vargeisa’s name suggests she was a thief (vargr).

Grendel’s mother is similarly called a grundwyrgen ‘ground/depth-thief/outcast/wolf(?)’ (1518), a term in which -wyrg(en) is cognate with Varg- in Vargeisa, and she and her son inhabit a lair containing many treasures, presumably illicitly acquired. Moreover, there are other indications (examined more fully later) that Grendel and his mother were sword-thieves. Most importantly, Grendel is a heorowearh, a unique compound that, in my view, may be interpreted as ‘sword-criminal’, more specifically ‘sword-thief’ (1267). For her part, Grendel’s mother furtively takes her son’s severed sword-like arm from Heorot. Additionally, she is heorogifre … grim ond grædig ‘sword-greedy … grim and greedy’ (1498–9), which, taken literally, suggests that she was…

62 And more precisely with ON vargynja ‘she-wolf’ (plural vargynjur), a term that, I suggest below, may describe Vargeisa. Whether OE wearg and the related -wyrgen refer to wolves is questionable, according to Robinson, ‘Germanic *uargaz’.
63 For ‘thief’ as the original sense behind wearg, see n. 57 above, though Robinson, ‘Germanic *uargaz’, 246 says heorowearh means ‘fierce outlaw’, and KB, 395 has ‘fierce outcast, savage foe’. Heorw(-) means ‘sword’ elsewhere in Beowulf, such as only shortly afterwards in heoru (1285). A word related to wearth, werga ‘accursed’, describes Grendel in wergan gastes ‘of the accursed spirit’ (133; also describes the Devil in 1747). Unferð is condemned to werhðo ‘damnation’ (589)—another related word—in Hell, where Grendel also resides. In an Old English translation of Genesis, Cain is awyrged ‘cursed’ by God for killing Abel; S. J. Crawford (ed.), The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, AElfric’s Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis, EETS o.s. 160 (London, 1922), 92.
64 See Chapter 5.
65 KB, 396 defines heoro-gifre as ‘(sword-greedy), fiercely ravenous’; similarly, Cronan, ‘Poetic Words’, 31.
a sword-swallow, and therefore perhaps that she held at least one (probably stolen) sword within her body. If this sounds implausible, recall that Vargeisa used to pass her candle-sword between her hands and her mouth, that in the rimur Hálmþér seems to have taken the prized sword from her snout, and that other comparative evidence suggests a kinship between Grendel’s mother as brimwylf and a sword-swallowing fish (see Chapter 15).

The parallels between Vargeisa and Grendel’s mother go further still. Both journeyed through trees. Grendel’s mother passed after waldswaþum ‘along forest-tracks’ (1403). She presumably also passed through the frosty groves of trees that overhung the mere (1363–4), which may be identifiable with the fyrgenholt ‘mountain-wood’ (1393) to which Beowulf says she will not escape.

In addition, as Grendel’s mother emerged from water on to land, so too, most likely, did Vargeisa. There are three reasons for associating Vargeisa with water:

(a) The name Vargeisa and her presence on an island suggest that she may be akin to, or even one of, the vargynjur ‘she-wolves/thieves/outlaws’ who, according to the Eddic poem Hárbardsljóð ‘Lay of Hárbardr’ (37–9), smashed ships.

Later we shall adduce Old Norse myths in which certain fish swallow a sword or tremble upon a sword(?)-point—fish comparable, in my view, to Grendel’s mother as brimwylf.

Note also the ‘ship’-kenning vargr hafs eisar ‘the wolf of the sea dashes’. Elsewhere the verb eisa means ‘to shower down embers’; see CV s.v. eisa.

For an edition of most of the Eddic poems referenced in this study, see G. Neckel and H. Kuhn (ed.), Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, Band I. Text, corr. 5th edn. (Heidelberg, 1983), 84, although my quotations use different orthography. Stanza numbering is that of this Neckel-Kuhn edition, for the poems found therein. Translations from Eddic poetry are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
belonging to the thunder-god Þórr on Hlísey ‘Hlér’s Island’.\(^{70}\) Hlíér is an alias of Ægir, a sea-giant whose nine daughters personified waves—aquatic phenomena liable to dash ships on shores.\(^{71}\)

(b) Vargeisa’s nature as a finngálkn provides reason to link her with both water and Grendel’s mother. An episode from the thirteenth-century Icelandic Brennu-Njáls saga ‘Saga of Burnt-Njáll’ describes the foreign exploits of an Icelandic chieftain named Þorkell hákr Þorgeirsson, which seem to have been styled on the eastern giant-killing expeditions of Þórr.\(^{72}\) First, Þorkell killed an evildoer in a Swedish wood. Second, after a long struggle, he slew a finngálkn east of the south-west coast of Finland, after he had gone to find water one evening. Third, further east again, he killed a flying dragon in Estonia. As others have observed,\(^{73}\) the finngálkn’s lair was presumably in or near a body of water, as was Grendel’s mother’s. Hence the Icelandic hero’s three fights may parallel, or reflect, the three great fights of Beowulf against the evildoer Grendel, Grendel’s semi-aquatic mother and a flying dragon. This parallel correlates Grendel’s mother with a finngálkn.

(c) Hraudungr ‘Destroyer(?),’ the name by which Hjálmþér refers to Vargeisa’s father in one version of his opening stanza to her, is elsewhere that of a sea-king.\(^{74}\)

A final, important similarity between Vargeisa and Grendel’s mother is that after they are overcome by the lone hero, a solar light appears. Beowulf beheaded Grendel’s mother with the giant sword in a stroke described as a hard neck-grip, whereupon (we shall see) a sun-like light immediately shone. Hjálmþér removed a transformative curse on

---

70 See also Chapter 7 of this study for Hjálmþér’s subsequent encounter with ship-smashing troll-women in the same saga.
71 Cf. Chapter 7 n. 71.
74 SnESkáld, I, 110.
Vargeisa, and thereby eliminated the finngálkn, by jumping on her neck and kissing her—she then gave him the sword and assumed her true form as Álsól ‘All-Sun’ or Álfsól ‘Elf-Sun’.

The nature of the relationship between Hjálmpés saga and Beowulf is elusive, but although some influence of Beowulf on the saga is conceivable, it is clearly not a case of simple borrowing. Whatever the exact relationship, it seems quite likely that the saga’s candle-sword, its monstrous female guardian and her killer are counterparts to, respectively, the candle-like giant sword, Grendel’s mother and Beowulf.

**Grýla’s Icicle-Candle**

Vargeisa is not the only monstrous Norse female associated with a metaphorical candle and comparable to Grendel’s mother. A Modern Icelandic word for ‘icicle’, especially a large one, is grýlukerti, literally ‘Grýla’s candle’,75 Grýla being the name of a monstrous folkloric female notorious for attacking children especially. Although this particular icicle-candle is not equated, explicitly at least, with a sword, it merits attention for reasons that will soon become apparent.

The compound noun grýlukerti is not attested in Old Norse literature, but its first element, grýlu, does appear in medieval sources as the name of a terrifying ogress.76 Among the medieval sources is Skáldskaparmál ‘The Language of Poetry’, part of Snorri’s Prose Edda. There Grýla appears near the start of a list of poetic names of trollkvinna ‘troll-women’, which is thought to date from the twelfth century: Gríðr ok Gnissa Grýla, Brýla … ‘Gríðr and Gnissa, Grýla, Brýla …’77 One manuscript of Skáldskaparmál also contains a verse list of Grýlu heiti ‘(Poetic) Names for Grýla’, judging from which Grýla was identified with a fox (a canid) and may also have had a giant, lupine, devilish aspect.78

---

77 SnESkáld, I, 112; PTP, 724.
78 PTP, 965–7. With skolli and skollr, compare the wolf Skoll (also Skollr) discussed in Chapter 10.
Skolli, slapparðr ok Skaufhali, skollr, melrakki, skaufi, Grýla; enn es refr ok Skрогр, öldungr, dáinn, laufafettir, fóa, brunnmigi.

Skulker [a folkloric fox], weakling and Skaufhali [‘Tassel-Tale’, a fox humanized as an old outlaw in one tale], skulker/deceiver, arctic fox [literally ‘sand-bank dog’], tailed one, Grýla; further there is fox and Skрогр [a folkloric giant whose name suggests a devilish and/or lupine nature], famous man/elder, deceased one, leaf-pacer, fox, spring/well-pisser.80

In addition, the first part of the twelfth-century Svërris saga ‘Sverrir’s Saga’ is named Grýla. According to one late fourteenth-century commentator, this is because the saga’s contents prompted the belief that great wars would arise but quickly fade away.81 From this explanation we might tentatively infer that Grýla was a threatening character who was associated with hostilities, but who soon vanished. More likely, however, this part of the saga is so-called because Sverrir and his men had lived for a time as outlaws in the Norwegian wilderness, from which they descended, like Grýla, to obtain food from local people.82

Medieval sources give scant details of Grýla’s character. But as one scholar observes, ‘the number of extant thirteenth-century references stresses that the associations of her name must have been well-known to most people’.83 This raises the possibility that traditions about her existed considerably earlier. Also, what little these sources do reveal about Grýla strengthens the impression conveyed by later folklore that she has more than a little in common with Grendel’s mother.

Grýla evidently impressed Snorri, since hers was the name he chose for his booth upp frá ‘above’ the Law-Rock at Þingvellir in Iceland, according to Sturlunga saga ‘The Saga of the Sturlungar’.84 This reference gives no firm indication of Grýla’s character, but Snorri’s wry choice

80 See further on these names the notes in PTP, 966–7, to which I owe this translation.
83 Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 34.
of name may well have been intended to unsettle his opponents. In later Icelandic folklore, Grýla is notorious as a ferocious old woman with a beard and deformed nails who descends from the mountains at Christmas to stuff into her bag misbehaved children, whom she will later devour, though her appetite also extends to adults. It seems likely that Snorri was likening his descent from his booth to that of Grýla upon her prey.

The notion that a man might assume the persona of Grýla when descending on foes probably also explains a verse quoted by one Loftr Pálsson, slightly later in Sturlunga saga, when he rode to attack his enemies at Breiðabólstaðir in 1221:

‘Hér ferr Grýla
í garð ofan
ok hefir á sér
hala fimmtán.’

‘Here Grýla comes down from above into the yard and has on herself fifteen tails.’

That Grýla was known in the thirteenth century for her hostile journeys is also indicated by a verse recited still later in Sturlunga saga by a certain Guðmundr Galtason. He seems to imply that it is time to adopt the persona of Grýla and attack his foes:

‘Hvat’s um,—hví kveðum sæta?
Heim gengr Sterkr af verki.
Vitu rekkar nú nakkvat
nýligs um für Grýlu?’

‘What’s up—why are we talking about making peace? [Jón the] Strong is going home from work. Now do you warriors know any news about Grýla’s journeys?’

85 Her thirteen sons, born either to the trollish Leppa-Lúði ‘Jerk of Rags/Locks (of Hair)’ or a former partner, do likewise. They are therefore known as the Jólasveinar ‘Yule Lads’.
86 Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, Sturlunga saga, I, 281.
Additionally, Sturlunga saga refers to a certain Steingrímr Skinngryluson ‘Skin-Grýla’s son’,\(^8\) one of Loftr Pálsson’s principal targets. This indicates that Grýla had at least one son in medieval tradition—later Icelandic lore tells of men behaving like plural grýlur\(^9\)—and that she was associated with a skin or skins. Sturlunga saga also mentions a man called Grýlu-Brandr ‘Grýla’s Firebrand/Sword’,\(^{10}\) which suggests that Grýla, the monster with the icicle-candle, was also associated with a fiery sword.

Faroese folklore, albeit not recorded until the nineteenth century, assigns Grýla a skálm ‘short sword’ or ‘knife’ (or more than one)—a ‘slightly archaic word’\(^{11}\)—and corroborates her descent from high ground.\(^{12}\) Grendel’s mother also had such a weapon, a seax (1545). Furthermore, in the Faroe Isles, Grýla appeared during Lent, the period leading up to Easter,\(^{13}\) which corresponds to the time at which Grendel’s mother attacked Heorot, according to the Beowulf-poet’s perspective (if my interpretation is correct). Nowadays, Grýla appears in the Faroes on days preceding Lent, but she is especially associated with a single night, Grýlukvøld ‘Grýla’s night’, that of Shrove Tuesday.\(^{14}\) Grendel’s mother similarly attacked on a single night.

Finally, there is evidence linking the post-medieval Icelandic Grýla with the wilderness-dwelling monsters called pingálp and Finngálpn,\(^{15}\) two variants of finngálpkn,\(^{16}\) the monster-term used of both Vargeisa and Þorkell hákr Porgeirsson’s second monstrous foe. Both Grýla and Vargeisa probably shared an equine aspect, too, both being tailed, hoofed and equipped with long manes or heads of hair.

A connection between Grýla and Grendel’s mother has been advanced previously by William Sayers,\(^{17}\) but mainly on the basis of linguistic correspondence. He observes that Grýla is etymologically

\(8\) Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, Sturlunga saga, I, 279–82.

\(9\) Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 35.

\(10\) Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, Sturlunga saga, I, 497.


\(12\) Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 38.

\(13\) Gunnell, Origins, 166; Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 38–9.

\(14\) Gunnell, Origins, 162.


\(16\) See Gunnell, Origins, 144–5.

related to OE gryre ‘horror, terror’; in fact, he calls the former word ‘the Norse equivalent’ of the latter, which the Beowulf-poet uses twice of Grendel’s mother in the following passage:99

\[
\text{Waes se gryre læssa} \\
\text{efne swa micle swa bið mægþa cræft,} \\
\text{wiggryre wifes, be wæpnedmen … (1282–4)}
\]

The horror/attack [of Grendel’s mother] was lesser by just as much as is the strength of maidens, the war-horror/attack of a woman, in comparison to [that of] a weaponed man …

The same word gryre describes Grendel’s mother in Beowulf’s report of his Danish adventure to his lord, Hygelac: the hero terms her a grimne gryrelincne grundhyrde ‘fierce, terrible seabed-herder’ (2136). Sayers wisely stops short, however, of claiming that we are authorized to believe that ‘Grendel’s mother was named Gryre in some distant version of the tale’.100

In my view, Sayers perhaps somewhat exaggerates the significance of the etymological connection between ON Grýla and OE gryre, as they are clearly not exact cognates.101 At the same time, though, other similarities between the two females are considerably more extensive than he observes. Thus both:

(a) Are ancient ogresses of varying or uncertain appearance.

(b) Are not, at the same time, of clear-cut gender. In Beowulf it is only the Danes’ uncertain opinion that Grendel’s companion took idese onlicæs ‘the form of a woman’ (1349–51), a phrase

---

98 Sayers, ‘Grendel’s Mother’, 261 n. 11 compares Middle Low German gruvel, grüvel, MHG griuvel ‘fright, terror’, Norwegian grysja ‘frighten, terrify’ and Old Danish groave ‘strain’, from Indo-European *ghreu-*, ‘bring into a heightened emotional state’.


100 Sayers, ‘Grendel’s Mother’, 263.

101 Neither ANEW nor IO, s.v. grýla refer to OE gryre, which lacks an -l- suffix. The former does, however, mention OE begroren ‘frightened’ and agrisan ‘to quake, fear’. The latter work traces grýla back to the Indo-European root *ghrēu-* ‘to rub hard’, ‘crush’.

102 OE ides can also mean ‘queen’; cf. Queen Lúða in Hjálmþés saga.
which suggests she might not be all she appears, and the poem describes her in both masculine and feminine terms.\textsuperscript{103} Grýla was also called \textit{ǫldungr}, a masculine noun interpretable as ‘famous man’, and the persona of the bearded Grýla is adopted by men apparently without undermining their masculinity.\textsuperscript{104} Furthermore, a description of Grýla from the Faroe Islands—albeit not recorded until the twentieth century—attributes her a huge wooden phallus.\textsuperscript{105}

(c) Have a canine/lupine aspect and associations.

(d) Snatched and killed humans, in both cases apparently by eating them. The body of Æschere, the Dane whom Grendel’s mother snatched, was never found.

(e) Attacked on a single night before summer. Both also have associations with Lent.

(f) Invaded human habitations from the wilds. Grýla ‘came from the wild, \textit{outside} the civilized surrounding of the farm’.\textsuperscript{106}

(g) Advanced from high ground. Beowulf and the Danes who retraced Grendel’s mother’s steps passed over \textit{steap stanhlíðo} ‘steep rocky slopes’ (1409).

(h) Wielded a short sword or knife.

(i) Are in some sense dead. Grýla was called \textit{dáinn} ‘deceased one’;\textsuperscript{107} Grendel’s mother inhabited a hellish lake to which human corpses were brought.

(j) Polluted water. Grýla is a \textit{brunnmiga} ‘spring/well-pisser’; Beowulf cleansed Grendel’s turbulent mere by beheading both Grendel and his mother.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[103] See Orchard, \textit{Critical Companion}, 189; D. M. Oswald, \textit{Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature} (Woodbridge, 2010), 91–101; P. B. Taylor, ‘Beowulf’s Second Grendel Fight’, \textit{NM} 86 (1985), 62–9 at 63: ‘the sex of the assailant is grammatically confused’. See also Nitzsche, ‘Structural Unity’, 294 on ‘the inversion of the feminine role of the queen or hall-ruler by Grendel’s mother’.
\item[104] Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 35.
\item[105] Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 40. Sayers, ‘Grendel’s Mother’, 262 takes the view that ‘a great deal of an original conception of medieval Grýla has been retained in the later folklore of Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Shetland, and Orkney’.
\item[106] Gunnell, ‘Grýla’, 36.
\item[107] As were a dwarf and a stag (see Chapter 13).
\end{footnotes}
(k) Are linked with the sea and to some extent piscine. Late Faroese folklore records that Grýla wore a coat of seaweed, and sometimes had a fish-stomach. We shall later find that, as a brimwylf, Grendel’s mother may well be likened to a greedy fish.

(l) Last but not least, are associated with an icicle-candle (if my interpretation of Beowulf’s imagery is correct). Given Grýla’s unremittingly hostile nature, her icicle-candle, whose touch would presumably inflict ice-burns, might have been identified, or conflated, with the brand ‘(burning) sword’ after which Grýlu-Brandr was possibly named. We may compare Beowulf’s imagery of the burning, melting giant sword found in proximity to Grendel’s mother, which dwindled ‘with battle-icicles’.

As with Vargeisa, however, the precise nature of the connection between Grendel’s mother and Grýla seems destined to remain obscure.

The Giant Sword as Solar Candle

Having demonstrated the presence of candle-sword imagery in medieval Irish and Norse texts, and in Norse the existence of female bearers of candle-weapons comparable to Grendel’s mother, I turn now to a detailed examination of the evidence for a similar concept of the giant sword in Beowulf, and for its likely solar nature. This evidence, I emphasize, is subtle and implicit. As noted earlier, my hypothesis that the melting giant sword is implicitly likened to a melting candle is supported by a passage found only shortly earlier in the poem.

Soon after discovering the giant sword in the monsters’ lair at the bottom of the mere, Beowulf used it to kill Grendel’s mother, whereupon the rodores candel ‘sky’s candle’ shone in the cave:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Geseah ða on searwum} & \quad \text{sigeadig bil}, \\
\text{ealdsweord eotenisc} & \quad \text{egum þyhtig}, \\
\text{wigena weorðmynd.} & \quad \text{Þæt was wæpna cyst,}
\end{align*}
\]

The Waning Sword

buton hit wæs mare ḏonne æniġ mon oðer
to beadulace æðberan meahte,
god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc.
He gefeng þa fetelhilt, freca Scyldinga,
hreoh ond heorogrim, hringmæl gebrægd,
aldres orwena, yrringa sloh,
þæt hire wið halse heard grapode,
banhringas bræc; bil eal ðurhwod
fægne flæschoman; heo on flet gecrong.
Sweord wæs swatig, secg weorce gefeh.
Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod,
efne swa of hefene hadre scineð
rodores candel. He æfter recede wlat;
hwearf þa be wealle, væpen hafenade
heard be hiltum Higelaces ðegn,
yrre ond anræd. (1557–75)

He [Beowulf] saw then among the armour a victory-eager bill [i.e., sword], a giantish old-sword, doughty in its edges, the pride of warriors. It was the choicest of weapons, except that it was more [i.e., larger] than any other man might bear into battle-play [i.e., battle], good and splendid/well-equipped, the work of giants. He seized then the ringed/chained/belted(?) hilt, the champion of the Scyldingas, savage and sword-grim, drew the ring-marked (sword), despairing of life, [and] struck angrily, so that he/it gripped her hard by the neck, broke bone-rings [i.e., vertebrae]; the bill entirely penetrated the doomed body;¹⁰⁹ she fell on the floor. The sword was sweaty/bloody; the man/sword rejoiced in the deed. The radiance [se leoma] shone, light stood within, just as the sky’s candle shines brightly from heaven. He looked along the hall; then he turned by the wall, holding the weapon hard by its hilt, Hygelac’s thane, angry and resolute.

The kenning rodores candel appears only here in Old English poetry, but is echoed later in Beowulf when the hero returns home to Hygelac: "Woruldcandel scan, sigel suðan fus ‘The world-candle shone, the sun eager from the south’ (1965–6)."¹¹⁰ It denotes the sun,"¹¹¹ which is described similarly in other, probably later Old English texts as dægcandel ‘day-candle’, friþcandel ‘peace-candle’, Godes candel ‘God’s candle’, heofoncandel

¹⁰⁹ I.e., the sword beheaded her, as Beowulf later confirms (2138–40).
¹¹⁰ Cf. Völuspá 4: sól skein sunnan ‘the sun shone from the south’.
¹¹¹ So KB, 360, s.v. candel.
‘heaven-candle’, \(^{112}\) merecandel ‘mere/sea-candle’, svegelcandel ‘sky-candle’, wedercandel ‘weather-candle’ and wyncandel ‘joy-candle’.\(^{113}\)

Additionally, rodores candel recalls the poet’s earlier description of the sun at dawn as a beorht beacen Godes ‘bright beacon of God’ (570),\(^{114}\) which shone from the east after Beowulf’s swimming-contest with Breca and killing of sea-monsters—an episode that foreshadows Beowulf’s struggle with Grendel’s mother. It also finds a significant (perhaps partly derived) parallel in Grettis saga, in which the men of Bárðardalr, Iceland attribute the eponymous hero’s defeat of a she-troll to the light of dawn, which turned her to stone while the pair were wrestling.\(^{115}\) It seems clear, therefore, that whatever se leoma ‘the radiance/light’ was that shone in Grendel’s lair after his mother’s death, it is likened to the sun imagined as a burning candle.

The origin of this radiance, about which the poet appears artfully ambiguous, matters greatly for the purpose of this study. Various origins are possible and I shall examine more than one. They include:

(a) The firelight or fiery light mentioned in lines 1516–7 (fyrleohht geseah, / blacne leoman beorthte scinan ‘he [Beowulf] saw firelight, a pale [or ‘brilliant’] light shining brightly’), which may be connected with the earlier reference to fyr on flode ‘fire on/in the flood’ (1366).\(^{116}\) This light might be from a domestic fire. Alternatively, it might be from hellfire, the mere being a representation of Hell.\(^{117}\)

(b) An emanation from the severed head or decapitated torso of Grendel’s mother, since it appears immediately after her beheading. As such, it might be a Germanic relative of the Avestan x̂varənah- (khvarnah),\(^{118}\) a radiant force embodying

---

\(^{112}\) This word can also denote ‘sun and moon’ and the fiery pillar of Exodus.

\(^{113}\) For instances of these words, see BT, BTS and DOE.

\(^{114}\) The Cross is described in similar terms in another Old English poem; see M. Swanton (ed.), The Dream of the Rood, rev. edn. (Exeter, 1987), 93 (line 6), 98 (line 83), 99 (line 118).

\(^{115}\) Guðni Jónsson, Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, 213.

\(^{116}\) Presumably at least partly a will-o’-the-wisp.


divine sovereignty and heroic glory that resided in the waters of a mythical sea. Alternatively, it might derive from the sun. In that case the episode would echo, for example, an ancient Indian myth linked, as in Beowulf, to the release of fresh water, by slaying the monstrous cobra \( Vṛtra \) ‘Obstacle’ and then its mother, Dānu, with a resounding or sun-like mace, the god Indra released the world’s waters from captivity and gave rise, according to some accounts, to the sky, the sun and the dawn. If the body of Grendel’s mother contained sunlight, this would explain why her blood was (arguably) so hot.

(c) The light associated with Christ, especially during the Harrowing of Hell, when he redeemed the righteous inhabitants of Hell by assuming the heat and light of the sun and using the sign of the Cross. In the Old English translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus (an imperfect text of which survives in the Southwick Codex) this light appears on \( þære þeostra dymnysse \) … swylce þær gylden sunna onæled wære ‘in the dimness of darknesses … as if the golden sun were kindled there’. The appearance of Christ’s light in darkness is ‘the central image’ of Old English accounts of the Harrowing of Hell.

120 By beheading Grendel and his mother, Beowulf is said to have cleansed the mere’s waters.
122 See Chapter 15.
(d) Light from gleaming gold, especially in view of parallels in Old Norse poetry. In that case, it might be from the many treasures in the cave, among which were the splendid sword Hrunting, described not long before as *se beadoleoma* ‘the battle-light’ (1523), and the giant sword. Swords often shine or blaze in literature and mythology. Compare especially the sword described as a *bjartr gunnlogi* ‘bright battle-flame’ with which the hero Grettir slew the giant *Gangr* ‘Walking One’ (compare *Grendel gongan* ‘Grendel walking’ in *Beowulf* 711) in an episode of his saga famous for its similarities to *Beowulf*’s fight with Grendel and his mother.

The poet’s purposefully allusive, ambiguous imagery— a key aspect of his ‘integrative genius’—enables more than one of these potential origins to coexist and to be evoked simultaneously. Taken together, the many analogues to this part of *Beowulf* in Old Norse texts underline, rather than dispel, this rich uncertainty, which is characteristic of mythological symbols. Upon close examination of the words of *Beowulf*, however, the giant sword appears the most immediately obvious source of the radiance. This point is of obvious importance for an identification of the melting giant sword with the image of a solar candle.

---


128 In addition to the Old English, Old Norse and medieval Irish instances identified elsewhere in this study, note the flaming sword of *Genesis* 3:24; the blazing sword of Arthur in Welsh mythology; the sword called *Dyrnwyn* ‘White-Hilt’, also in Welsh tradition; the *Claidheamh Soluis* ‘Sword of Light’ of Irish and Scottish folklore; and the dazzlingly radiant hilts of El Cid’s swords in medieval Spanish tradition (see Chapter 6 n. 84). Also noteworthy is the German term *Flammenschwert*, literally ‘flame-sword’, for a sword whose blade has undulating edges; cf. English ‘flambard’ and ‘flamberge’.

129 Guðni Jónsson, *Grettis saga*, 216–7. On the term *gunnlogi*, see LP s.v.; Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*, 51; P. A. Jorgensen, ‘Grendel, Grettir and Two Skaldic Stanzas’, *Scripta Islandica* 24 (1973), 54–61; and Chapter 12. There is some doubt whether *bjartr gunnlogi* describes Grettir’s *sax* ‘short sword’ or the wall-hung sword for which the giant reached unsuccessfully; but we may suspect that, originally at least, Grettir slew the giant with the latter weapon, which is comparable to the giant sword.

130 Nagler, ‘*Beowulf*’, 147.

131 At the corresponding point in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Sellic Spell*, a prose story in the style of a folk-tale on the subject of *Beowulf*, ‘it seemed to Beewolf [i.e., Beowulf] that the light came from the sword, and that the blade was on fire’; Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 377–8 (contrast Tolkien’s earlier version, p. 400).
Key to this nonexclusive identification is the presence in the passage quoted above of a small but crucial word: the definite article *se* in *se leoma* ‘the radiance’ (1570). This word is often overlooked in translations, but its presence favours identification of *se leoma* with a closely preceding subject. One candidate is the *fyrlæoht*, the *blacne leoman*, of lines 1516–7, but it is not the most immediate, as *sweord* and *secg* appear in line 1569. In fact, we need not choose between these last two candidates, as the grammatical subject of the phrase *secg weorce gefeh* appears purposefully ambiguous: man (*secg*) and sword (*secg*) are one in their moment of victory. The implicit notion of a ‘living’ sword is reinforced by the ambiguous adjective *swatig*, which identifies the blade as both ‘sweaty’ like flesh and ‘bloody’; a ‘sweaty’ sword implies an extension of the man’s arm. The description of the light as having arisen—literally, *stod* ‘stood’—in the cave, although unremarkable when viewed in isolation, also appears suggestive in context, given the surrounding references to Beowulf holding the huge sword firmly by its hilt, which is to say upright.

Attentive listeners would perceive another reason to identify *se leoma* with the giant sword. Although the simplex *leoma* does not denote a

---

132 BT s.v. *secg*, es (first entry); OED s.v. *segge* 1. This poetic word appears frequently in *Beowulf*.  
133 OED s.v. *secg*, c; OED s.v. *sedge*, n.1. This word appears in *Beowulf* 684.  
135 See especially my discussion in Chapter 5 of a prosthetic sword in an Old Norse saga. Note also Beowulf’s earlier report of how he *geræhte* ‘reached’ water-monsters with the point of his sword, killed them *purh mine hand* ‘by my hand’ (556–8); see too my suggested interpretation, in Chapter 5, of Grendel’s arm as an *unheoru* ‘un/bad-sword’. Additionally, recall how Hrunting *agol grædig guðleoð* ‘sang a greedy war-song’ (1521–2) on Grendel’s mother’s head, as if vocalizing for Beowulf. Swords implicitly speak—and therefore have a form of life—in other Anglo-Saxon texts, such as riddles, including two early Latin instances by Aldhelm (c. 639–709) and Tatwine (c. 670–734), in which the weapons describe themselves in the first person; see SASE, 156–7. Generally on the notion of animate swords and swords with identities, see D. A. Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore, 2000), 208–9; S. E. Brunning, ‘The “Living” Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe: An Interdisciplinary Study’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2013); S. Brunning, *The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe: Experience, Identity, Representation* (Woodbridge, 2019), 139–56; S. Brunning, ‘Crossing Edges? “Person-Like” Swords in Anglo-Saxon England’, in S. Semple, C. Orsini and S. Mui (ed.), *Life on the Edge: Social, Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe* (Wendeburg, 2017), 409–18; M. Pearce, ‘The Spirit of the Sword and Spear’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23 (2013), 55–67; SASE5-7, 414–23; MIFL, motif F997.1 ‘Sword is spoken to as to human being’.
sword elsewhere in *Beowulf* or other Old English texts, it does appear in a sword-compound attested only in *Beowulf*. One instance occurs only shortly earlier, as we have just seen, in a closely comparable context: Hrunting is *se beadoleoma* (1523) as it strikes Grendel’s mother’s neck.\textsuperscript{136}

Also significant is a preceding instance of a synonymous compound in the Finnsburg-episode of *Beowulf* when a vengeful Hengest receives a sword either described as a *hildeleoma* ‘battle-light’ or named *Hildeleoma*:\textsuperscript{137}

\begin{verbatim}
Hengest ða gyt
wælfagne winter  wunode mid Finne.
He unhlitme  eard gemunde,
þeah þe ne meahte  on mere drifan
hringedstefnan—  holm storme weol,
won wiô winde,  winter yþe beleac
isgebinde—  òp ðæt ðær com
gear in geardas,  swa nu gyt deô,
þa ðe syngales  sele bewitiað,
wuldortortan weder.  Da wæs winter scacen,
fæger foldan bearm.  Fundode wrecca,
gist of gearum;  he to gyrmwraece
swïðor þohте  þonne to sælade,
gif he torngemot  þurhteon mihte,
þæt he Eotena bearn  inne gemunde.
Swa he ne forwyrnde  woroldraedenne
þonne him Hunlafing  hildeleoman,
billa selest,  on bearm dyde,
þæs wæron mid Eotenum  ecge cuðe. (1127–45)
\end{verbatim}

Hengest then still dwelt with Finn that water-hostile [or slaughter-stained] winter. He remembered his homeland not reluctantly(?), although he could not drive the ring-prowed ship on the ‘mere’ [mere]—the sea welled with storm, dark [won] against the wind, winter locked the waves in an ice-binding—until another spring came into the courts, as it still does now, those [seasons] that always keep to their times, gloriously bright weathers. Then

\textsuperscript{136} For the suggestion of a substantial degree of underlying identity between Hrunting and the giant sword, see Chapter 16.

\textsuperscript{137} This compound, unique to *Beowulf*, appears only once more, in the plural, denoting sword-like flames of dragon-fire (*hildeleoman* 2583).
winter was departed, the earth’s bosom fair. The exile was eager to go, the
guest from the courts; he thought more especially about revenge for injury
than about the sea-voyage, whether he could bring about a hostile meeting,
in that he inwardly remembered the children of the Jutes/giants. Thus he
did not reject the way of the world when Hunlafing placed a ‘battle-light’/
Hildeleoma, the best of bills [i.e., swords], in his lap, whose edges were
known among the Jutes/giants.

Here the appearance of the *hildeleoma* known among Jutes follows
shortly after the arrival of the vernal sun and the thaw that enabled the
sword’s use against the Jutes, a people whose Old English name, *Eotan,*
was apparently confused with the similar-sounding *eoten* ‘giant’. A comparable association appears following Beowulf’s killing of Grendel’s
mother, only in reverse: the appearances of the giant sword known to,
and used against, the giants, and of *se leoma* come shortly before the
vernal thaw, and the sword’s use brings about the end, rather than a
renewal, of hostilities. This parallel is underlined by a foreshadowing
in the quoted passage of Grendel’s mere (*mere* 1130)—a frosty, ice-
bound, yet also windy, stormy and turbulent, lake from which a wave
ascended *won* ‘dark’ to the clouds (1374). Also, in the presentation of a
(or the) *hildeleoma* to Hengest by Hunlafing (assuming this name denotes
a man), there is presumably a foreshadowing of the presentation of the
*beadoleoma* Hrunting to Beowulf by (H)unferð son of Ecglaf.

Another comparable use of -leoma appears in a related Old English
poem, the *Finnsburh Fragment.* There we find that *Swurdleoma stod,*
*swylce eal Finn[e]s Buruh fyrenu wære* ‘Sword-light stood/arose, as if all of
Finn’s stronghold were on fire’ (35–6).

Support for this interpretation of *se leoma* in Beowulf is also found
later in the poem. There other luminous swords appear, albeit less
dramatically. In Beowulf’s description of how the Heādo-Beardan will
be spurred into seeking vengeance against the Danes, he imagines them
being provoked by the sight of their dead kinsmen’s swords glistening at

---

139 Unferð appears in the *Beowulf*-manuscript as Hunferð, but probably as a result of
scribal addition of H- at an unknown date; see Neidorf, *Transmission*, 76–7. For
a proposal that Hunlafing actually is (H)unferð, and that Hrunting is the sword
mentioned in this passage, see L. E. Nicholson, ‘Hunlafing and the Point of the
140 KB, 284.
the sides of their killers: *On him gladiað gomelra lafe, / heard ond hringmael* ‘On them the leavings [i.e., swords] of old men will shine, hard and ring-marked’ (2036–7). Later still, before fighting the dragon, Beowulf says he had repaid the treasures that Hygelac had given him *leohtan sworode* ‘with a light/radiant sword’ (2492).

Sörli and Sigrljómi ‘Victory-Light’

Medieval Norse texts lend further support to the identification of *se leoma* with the giant sword. In Old Norse the cognate masculine noun *ljómi* ‘(flash of) light, beam’ appears both as a simplex for ‘sword’ and in ‘sword’-kennings. Of special interest is the sword *Sigrljómi* ‘Victory-Light’ found in *Sörla saga sterka* ‘The Saga of Sörli the Strong’, a tale attested in seventeenth-century manuscripts but possibly dating from the fifteenth.

According to this saga, Sigrljómi was a sword formerly owned by King Hrólfr Kraki, a figure probably identifiable with Hroðulf, Hroðgar’s nephew in *Beowulf*, and potentially therefore a recipient of the giant sword’s hilt, perhaps attached to a new blade. The giant sword is similarly identified with victory, being *sigeeadig* ‘victory-blessed’ (1557)—although this is a commonplace quality of a great sword, it may be added that OE *sige* and ON *sigr* are cognate.

It is not just the name *Sigrljómi* and its former owner that invite comparison with the giant sword. Events involving Sigrljómi parallel those of Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother.

As first identified in the saga, Sigrljómi is the sword of Högni, enemy of the titular Sörli (a Beowulf-like figure), and it is paired with an impenetrable shirt. A complication arises later, however, during the climactic fight between these two. Each killed the other’s mount with his sword, but their armour prevented them wounding each other. Consequently:

---

141 Elsewhere in Old English literature, note the shining sword, with gleaming hilt, of the mysterious sea-faring dragonslayer *weallende Wulf* ‘welling/surging Wolf’, which he left in a poisonous land to which no man could venture, as described in the poem *Solomon and Saturn II* (34–46); D. Anlezark (ed.), *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Cambridge, 2009), 80–1; Anlezark, *Water and Fire*, 323–33.

142 *LP* s.v. *ljómi*; *PTP*, 800–1.

143 *FSN*, III, 398.

144 *FSN*, III, 398.
Nú sér Sörli, at eigi muni tjá at skipta lengr höggum við Höguna. Snarar hann þá sverðinu langt frá sér í burt ok ræðr þegar á Höguna, en hann gripi í mót af öllu afli, ok sviptast þeir nú harðliga.

Sörli now sees that it would not avail to trade blows any longer with Högni. He then throws the sword a long way away from himself and at once attacks Högni, and he grapples with him with all his might, and now they wrestle harshly.

Sörli tries to haul Högni into a very deep brook nearby, but Högni manages to push him to the ground and then leaps on him and knees him in the stomach. The story continues:

Pá mælti Högni: ‘Fjarri mér er nú sverðit Sigrljómi, er ek þess helzt við þarf, ok mun þat þykkja ílla at unnit, ef ek bit þik á barkann, sem tröll gera, ok ef svá er sem sagt er, at þú sért manna hugaðastr ok fullhugi kallaðr, þá liggðu hér nú kyrð ok bið mín, á meðan ek tek sverðit.’

Stóð Högni þá upp ok gekk þangat, sem sverðit lá ...

Then Högni said: ‘Far from me now is the sword Sigrljómi, when I have most need of it, and it will seem ill-done if I bite into your windpipe as trolls do, and if it is as is said, that you are the most courageous of men and called a dauntless man, then lie still here now and await me, while I take the sword.’

Högni stood up then and went where the sword lay ...

Högni then spared Sörli’s life, as Sörli had previously offered mercy to Högni’s father, and the two came to peaceful terms.

The quoted passage raises an obvious question, in that when Sörli throws sverðinu ‘the sword’ far away frá sér ‘from himself’ before grappling with Högni, it is presumably his own sword that he discards, having found that it would not bite. Consequently, the reader is left wondering how Högni’s sword, Sigrljómi, came to be lying on the ground far from him. We might perhaps infer that Högni had similarly cast his sword away before he began wrestling, but in lieu of any explicit statement to this effect the reader gets the impression that Sörli’s discarded sword is somehow now the sword Sigrljómi which Högni goes to fetch. It is tempting to compare the implicit association

---

145 FSN, III, 407.
146 FSN, III, 407.
(discussed further in Chapter 16) between Hrunting—the *beadoleama* ‘battle-light’ which Beowulf discards when he finds it cannot harm Grendel’s mother (equivalent to Sörli’s discarded sword)—and the *sigeeadig* giant sword highly suggestive of *se leoma*. At least, the potential for confusion and conflation is clear.

This fight between Sörli and Högni also echoes an earlier encounter in the same saga between Sörli and a trollish crone, from whom the hero obtained his sword and some impenetrable armour. The earlier tussle is itself analogous to that between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother.\(^\text{147}\) In summary (and with comparisons to *Beowulf* and the above-quoted episode in parenthesis), that encounter, along with an associated second fight with an ogress, proceeds as follows.\(^\text{148}\)

Sörli was the younger son of a Norwegian king and a female descendant of the Æsir (the Norse heathen gods) called Dagný ‘New Day’. He was extraordinarily strong (like Beowulf). Once, when he and his men were sailing home, they lost their way in dense fog. They disembarked in a strange land (compare Beowulf’s sea-journey to Denmark). Sörli then passed through woods by a mountain (compare the *fyrgenholt* ‘mountain-wood’ of *Beowulf* 1393). He came to a large cave (compare the cave-like home of Grendel and his mother).

Inside the cave Sörli saw a terrible *jötunn* ‘giant’ (compare Grendel as *eoten* 761) who was *liggja í sinni rekkju* ‘lying on his bed’ (as Grendel, albeit lifeless, was *on ræste … licgan* ‘lying on a bed’, 1585–6).\(^\text{149}\) Sörli also saw an old, initially unnamed woman, who was rather *stórmannliga* ‘like a great man’ (compare Grendel’s anonymous, aged giantess of a mother and her masculine aspect).\(^\text{150}\) She was butchering the flesh of men and horses (compare Grendel and doubtless his dagger-wielding mother as maneaters).

Sörli overheard the old woman calling the giant *Skrimnir*, and Skrimnir claiming responsibility for the great fog and wind that

\(^{147}\) See Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear’s Son*, 64–9. Parallels with Hjálmpér’s aforementioned adventures will also be apparent.

\(^{148}\) *FSN*, III, 369–79.

\(^{149}\) *FSN*, III, 373.

\(^{150}\) *FSN*, III, 373.

\(^{151}\) *Skrimnir* in *FSN*, III, but as the name does not appear in poetry in this saga the quantity of its first ‘i’ cannot be determined. This was also the name of the giant encountered by Hjálmpér. I remark on its possible significance in Chapter 14. Note also the rather similarly named giant *Skrýmir*, whose glove and food-bag I compare to Grendel’s glove in Chapter 5.
had brought the men there (compare Grendel’s association with mist and wind in Beowulf 162, 1358, 1360).

Next Sörli entered the cave and quickly slew Skrimnir on his bed by thrusting his sword into the giant’s jaws (compare Beowulf beheading Grendel on his bed, albeit after killing Grendel’s mother).

The crone then attacked Sörli with a skálm (compare Grendel’s mother attacking with a seax); its point (oddrinn) pierced Sörli’s breast (brjóstit), but apparently did no major damage (similarly, the seax failed to kill Beowulf, as his chainmail bréostnet ‘breast-net’ resisted its ord ‘point’, 1547–9).\(^{152}\)

She attacked Sörli repeatedly, and had he not evaded each blow hefði hann dauða beðit ‘she would have been the death of him’ (compare Beowulf aldres orwena ‘despairing of life’, 1565).\(^{153}\) She had fiery breath and eyes (compare Grendel’s mother’s possible internal heat and her son’s eyes which gleamed like fire).

Sörli threw down his sword (as Beowulf discarded Hrunting, 1531–2), and rushed beneath tröllkonuna ‘the troll-woman’ (compare Grendel’s mother as giantess).\(^{154}\) She sank her claws into him (compare Grendel’s mother’s attempt to pierce Beowulf with her fingers, 1505).

They wrestled (as did Beowulf and Grendel’s mother). She tripped on the edge of a chasm (compare Sörli’s attempt to wrestle Högni into the very deep brook). They both fell into it as she held on to Sörli’s hair and chest, though he landed on top (compare Beowulf’s stumble and fall, Grendel’s mother’s setting upon him, and his subsequent rise, 1543–56).

Tók Sörli þá báðum höndum fyrir kverkar henni ‘Sörli then seized her with both hands around her throat’ and did not let go (compare how Beowulf hire wið halse heard grapode ‘gripped her [Grendel’s mother] hard by the neck’, 1566).\(^{155}\) Next Sörli kneed her in the stomach (as Högni did to him), and all her strength left her.

She pleaded for her life, which Sörli granted on condition that she fetch him, within a month, armour that no sword could pierce and sverð þat, er eins bíti stál sem stein ‘the sword which bites steel as well as stone’.\(^{156}\) (Compare Högni requesting that Sörli wait while he fetched the

\(^{152}\) FSN, III, 374.

\(^{153}\) FSN, III, 374.

\(^{154}\) FSN, III, 374.

\(^{155}\) FSN, III, 375.

\(^{156}\) FSN, III, 375. Here stein ‘stone’ is probably a mistake for strá ‘straw’ (see below).
sword, as this seemed more honourable than biting him in the windpipe like a troll). She agreed and subsequently named herself Mána ‘Moon’.157

When Sörli returned to her cave to claim his prizes he found Mána, who is now his ‘lady friend’ (compare how Sörli and Högni became friends),158 losing a fight against another ogress. Together Sörli and Mána attacked this second ogress, whom he killed by running her through with his sword. Mána then presented him with the requested armour and a sverð bitrligt ‘sharp sword’, which were apparently elsewhere in her cave (compare the armour and the giant sword in Grendel’s cave).159 She explained that sverðit bítr allt eins stál sem strá ‘the sword bites everything, steel as well as straw’ (as the giant sword no doubt would, too).160

For all the similarities noted above, there is ostensibly a major difference between Sörli’s fight with Mána and Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother. In Beowulf, the hero kills the ogress by decapitating her, whereas in the saga, when Sörli might have strangled Mána, he spares her life (as Högni later spared his). This difference appears superficial, however. For it is clear that the saga-episode presents a symbolic death of the female monster:161 from henceforth Mána’s hostility to Sörli is no more and she becomes his friend.162 Probably we have here an adaptation of an earlier form of the story, in which the giantess died physically (as in Beowulf), to a common motif in the legendary sagas, namely that of the giantess as foster-mother to the hero.163 That Sörli originally killed Mána (or her forebear in an earlier form of the story) seems likely from the narrative redundancy of the pair’s subsequent fight against the unnamed ogress; Mána’s implacable hostility and physical death at the hands of the hero have probably been transferred to the second ogress.164

157 FSN, III, 375. I examine the significance of her name and of the one-month period in Chapter 14.
158 Also compare Vargeisa as Hjálmpéðr’s ‘female friend’ in Hjálmpés saga.
159 FSN, III, 379.
160 FSN, III, 379.
161 As was the case with Vargeisa.
162 Rather as Vargeisa became Ál(f)sól.
164 Cf. McKinnell, Meeting the Other, 139.
However we explain these parallels between *Sörla saga sterka* and *Beowulf* (shared use of a common story-pattern or influence from *Beowulf* on the saga, or something of both?), they increase the likelihood that the implicitly radiant Sigrljómi and the giant sword are closely related. So, too, does the testimony of the thirteenth- or fourteenth-century *Hrólf's saga kraka 'Hrólf Kraki's Saga',* in which the king’s sword is called *Gullinhjalti ‘Golden Hilt’,¹⁶⁵* a name corresponding closely to the designation of the giant sword’s handle as *gylden hilt ‘(the) golden hilt’* or perhaps *Gyldenhilt ‘Golden Hilt’,¹⁶⁶* when presented to Hroðgar in *Beowulf* (1677).

Whether or not Sigrljómi and Gullinhjalti are essentially the same weapon, the probable kinship between *Sigrljómi ‘Victory Light’* and the giant sword increases the likelihood of a degree of equivalence between the victorious giant sword and *se leoma* (and Hrunting as *beadoleoma*). This finding, in turn, increases the justification for relating the image of the melting giant sword to the *Beowulf*-poet’s preceding reference to a radiant solar candle.

### The Giant Sword as Paschal Candle

We have seen evidence both internal and external to *Beowulf* to suggest that a prime source of the sun-like light which shone immediately after the beheading of Grendel’s mother came at least partly from the triumphal giant sword. This conclusion is not new.¹⁶⁷ To my knowledge, however, nobody has linked the image of the giant sword shining like a solar candle with that of its melting with icicles shortly afterwards.

---

¹⁶⁵ *FSN*, I, 68–9; Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*, 51; cf. North, *Origins*, 52. Another sword that belonged to Hrólf was *Skofnungr ‘Polished One’,* which, according to his saga, was the best in the Northlands, rang loudly when it struck bone, and was buried with him; see *FSN*, I, 90, 99, 105; Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*, 60. Two other sagas record that the sun must not shine on its hilt, but without saying why; see Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Laxdæla saga, ÍF* 5 (Reykjavík, 1934), 172; Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Vatnsdæla saga, ÍF* 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), 235–6. For discussions of this sword, see SASE and Miller, *Epic Hero*, 211–2.


Nonetheless, it is a natural analogical extension that a sword which shines like a candle should melt like a candle. It appears equally natural that a sword which melts into icicles and is linked with sunlight should suggest the melting of ice under the vernal sun.

Consequently, the likely relationship of the image of the melting giant sword to the imagery of Easter, the Cross and baptism has apparently gone unnoticed. Scholars have argued persuasively, to my mind, for the presence of Christian allusions in the portrayal of Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother in a fiery mere, especially in relation to the imagery of the Harrowing of Hell, baptism and Holy Week. But, in my view, they have failed to suggest that the poet might delicately intimate the most prominent image of the Easter season, one closely linked to its baptismal ceremonies. For if the melting giant sword is imagined as a melting candle, in this context it seems reasonable to suggest that the poet may invite the listener to think of not just any candle but the most significant candle, the Paschal Candle. There are many reasons to entertain this proposal, though I stress that in presenting the following list I am in no way advocating a point-for-point allegorical interpretation of this part of Beowulf. I merely raise what is, in my eyes, an attractive possible significance to the giant sword-candle.

---

168 See, though, M. B. McNamee, ‘Beowulf—An Allegory of Salvation?’, JEGP 59 (1960), 190–207 at 200, 202 on the Gloucester candlestick. If OE eastre ‘Easter’ derives, as Bede states, from Eostre, ‘the name of a goddess whose festival was celebrated at the vernal equinox’ (OED s.v. Easter n.1), this suggests a connection with the sun in spring, especially as Eostre was ‘originally the dawn-goddess’ (ibid.). The dawn sun rises in the east (a related word), as was stated earlier in Beowulf when, immediately after the hero had killed a sea-monster (comparable to Grendel’s mother) with a hildebil ‘battle-bill’ (comparable to the giant sword), its appearance is accompanied by the calming of the sea (as it is after the killing of Grendel’s mother): Leoht eastan com, / beorht beacan Godes, brimu swapredon ‘Light came from the east, the bright beacon of God, the seas/waters became still’ (569–70).


170 For the possibility that the image of the giant sword as a large burning candle also has a basis in a heathen fertility ritual co-opted by the monks of Abingdon in the mid-tenth century, see Chapter 7.
First, although detailed information about the Anglo-Saxon Easter liturgy before the tenth century has not survived, the *Regularis concordia*, a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon code of Benedictine monastic law, records that the Paschal Candle was lit *Sabbato Sancto hora nona* ‘on Holy Saturday at the hour of None’. This was the hour, exactly or approximately, at which the mysterious light shone in the mere. We can tell this because, following the beheading of Grendel very soon after the death of his mother, we learn that the men waiting for Beowulf at the mere’s surface saw blood in the water *sona* ‘at once’ (1591) and assumed him dead, whereupon the poet adds starkly *Da com non dæges* ‘Then had come [or ‘came’] the ninth hour of the day’ (1600). This hour also (and more obviously) matches the time of Christ’s death on Good Friday and the time of the sun’s reappearance: *Matthew* 27:45, *Mark* 15:33 and *Luke* 23:44 record that during the Crucifixion the land was darkened from the sixth hour until the ninth, when Christ died; and *Luke* 23:45 states that during this time the sun was obscured (*obscuratus est sol*). In other words, the sun reappeared at, or soon after, the ninth hour. In *Beowulf*, the sun’s reappearance is represented by the sudden shining of the radiance like the ‘sky’s candle’ in the giants’ lair, an image also linked to Christ’s solar appearance during the Harrowing, and by the hero’s emergence from the mere soon afterwards bearing the giant sword’s golden hilt.

It might also be worth noting that the *Regularis concordia* also records that the Paschal Candle was lit by a *hastam cum imagine serpentis* ‘spear/staff with the image of a serpent’, more specifically by the *candela, quae in ore serpentis infixa est* ‘candle which is fixed in the serpent’s mouth’. At the risk of proposing a parallel too far, this is perhaps suggestive of Beowulf’s candle-sword shining immediately after contact with the neck of Grendel’s sword-greedy mother, a monster probably akin to Norse composite females and huge mythological serpents like Leviathan.

---

171 Bedingfield, *Dramatic Liturgy*, 145.
173 On these words, see Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 168–9.
174 Bedingfield, *Dramatic Liturgy*, 151 observes that several references to the Harrowing appear in the blessing of the Paschal Candle in the so-called *Gelasian Sacramentary*, the oldest manuscript of which dates from the eighth century.
176 See Chapter 15.
who inhabited a mere invested with serpents—*wyrmcynnes fela, sellice sædracan … wyrmas* ‘many of snake-kind, strange sea-dragons … snakes’ (1425–30)—and whose hot blood arguably contributed to the melting of the giant sword’s blade. We may recall, too, that in *Hjálmþés saga* the radiant candle-sword Snarvendill, which appears comparable to the giant sword, emerges from Vargeisa’s mouth; there is, furthermore, evidence that other Norse monsters comparable to Grendel’s mother had fiery breath.\(^{177}\)

Second, although the Paschal Candle has varied in size and weight down the centuries, it has invariably been the largest and heaviest ecclesiastical candle.\(^{178}\) Evidence for its size in Anglo-Saxon England seems to be lacking, but in later centuries it was sometimes remarkably big.\(^{179}\) Beowulf’s giant sword, which no other man could have wielded, was undoubtedly the largest and heaviest sword. If it is likened to a candle, it would make sense for it to be likened to a giant one.

Third, the lit Paschal Candle was traditionally dipped into and removed from water, specifically that of the baptismal font—a rite recorded by Alcuin.\(^ {180}\) If my line of thinking in subsequent chapters is correct, the giant sword did not originate in the mere, but was illicitly stored there following its theft or arrogation. Subsequently, Beowulf emerged from the waters of Grendel’s mere bearing its hilt in an episode suggestive of baptism.

Fourth, the Paschal Candle was traditionally made from beeswax, which was often equated with the flesh of Christ.\(^ {181}\) For the late Anglo-Saxon homilistÆlfric of Eynsham (c. 950 to c. 1010), *cereus Christi*

\(^{177}\) The Old Norse terms *imigustr* and *imugustr* for ‘disgust’ (CV) mean literally ‘giant’s gust’, with *imi-/ímu-* deriving from *ím* ‘embers’. Note also the monstrous she-cat in *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar* ‘The Tale of Ormr Stórolfsson’, from whose eyes, nose and mouth fire seemed to burn; Pórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (ed.), *Harbar saga, ÍF* 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), 409.

\(^{178}\) In the twelfth century it was known as the *cereum magnum* ‘great candle’; see P. M. Girard, *A Textual History and Theological Reflection on the Inscription of the Paschal Candle* (Lewiston, 2004), 28.


\(^{181}\) Girard, *Textual History*, 128–50, who concludes that ‘the beeswax of the Paschal Candle has been used as an allegory for the sinless flesh of Christ in the West since the early Middle Ages’ (150); MacGregor, *Fire and Light*, 408. In the *Ex(s)ultet*, a hymn sung in praise of the Paschal Candle in the Roman rite, the candle is identified as an object, derived *de operibus apum* ‘from the labours of bees’, whose flame is fed by *liquantibus ceris* ‘melting wax’ which *apis mater eduxit* ‘the mother-bee brought
humanitatem praefigurat ‘the [Paschal] candle stands for the humanity of Christ’. As noted earlier, the blade of the giant sword is described as ‘sweaty’, as if it were human flesh. Also, as suggested previously, swords may sometimes have been coated with wax to help prevent them rusting. In addition, scholars have often noted similarities between Beowulf (‘Bee(?)-Wolf’) and Christ, the plainest being the poem’s reference in this episode to ‘the ninth hour of the day’.

Fifth, the Paschal Candle was imagined as the world in microcosm by Ennodius (d. 521), a writer whose works were known in Anglo-Saxon England. In Beowulf, the melting of the giant sword with icicles evokes an image of the thawing of a frozen world.

Sixth, from an early date the Paschal Candle was associated with spiritual purification, particularly of water; hence its dipping in the font. Additionally, as part of the blessing of this candle, the early eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon Missal of Robert of Jumièges records that Huius ... sanctificatio noctis ... culpas lauat ‘The sanctification of this night ... washes away sins’, a passage also found in the Sarum Missal. Furthermore, the Paschal Candle was traditionally used to fumigate possessions, ward off the Devil and prevent bad weather. Correspondingly, the giant sword’s melting is concomitant with the purification and calming of the mere’s waters—waeron yðgebland eal gefælslots ‘the wave-blendings were all cleansed’ (1620)—and with the implicit arrival of good weather.

Seventh, the Paschal Candle was traditionally often held in an ornate metal, stone or wooden candlestick, adorned with symbolic scenes. Similarly, Beowulf’s giant sword had an inscribed, decorated hilt.

The idea that a prominent Christian image is alluded to at this point in the poem also receives general support from various Old Norse

---

183 See Chapter 3 n. 5.
184 MacGregor, Fire and Light, 302–3.
188 MacGregor, Fire and Light, 403–5.
189 See further Chapter 9.
analogue to Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother, though none contains a clear candle-sword. These analogues link the hero’s victory to his adoption or furtherance of Christianity, or otherwise follow up a monster’s death with a Christian reference:

(a) In the probably mid-fourteenth-century Icelandic Orms þáttu Stórolfssonar ‘Tale of Ormr Stórolfsson’, the hero slays a monstrous she-cat and her son after vowing to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome.

(b) In the Icelandic folktale Gullbrá og Skeggi ‘Gullbrá and Skeggi’, the hero, having remembered that Þórr failed to help him during his first encounter with the witch Gullbrá, vows before his second meeting with her to build a church. A great light then shines into her eyes, turning her to stone.

(c) In Grettis saga, the hero, having been abandoned by a priest, immediately takes the bones of two men that he found in a giant’s lair to a church (compare the Harrowing of Hell). With them he took a stick on which he inscribed two stanzas in runes, the second stanza culminating in the reference to a bjartr gunnloki ‘bright battle-flame’.

(d) In the Icelandic Þorsteins þáttu uxafóts ‘Tale of Þorstein Bull’s Leg’, which probably dates from the fourteenth century, the eponymous hero and another man kill a troll-woman called Skjaldvör after promising to accept the Christian faith of Óláfr Tryggvason. As soon as Þorstein made his promise, kemr geisli í skálann ógurliga bjartr ok stendr þvert framan í augun kerlingar ‘a terribly bright beam comes into the hall [i.e., of Skjaldvör] and streams [literally ‘stands across’] in front of the

190 Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmssson, Harðar saga, 417.
191 Jón Árnason, Íslenzkar þjóðsögur, I, 150. In Norse tradition, giants and other nocturnal or chthonic beings are often turned to stone when exposed to sunlight. We shall encounter more instances of this phenomenon later.
eyes of the old woman [i.e., Skjaldvör]. She immediately lost all strength, so that the men were eventually able to break her neck. Additionally, when Þorsteinn first came to Skjaldvör’s bed-closet, he saw that þar brann ljós á kertistiku ‘there burned a light on a candlestick’, which, after taking the sword that hung beside a shield above where she lay in bed, he extinguished. Here the candle and the sword might relate to Beowulf’s candle-sword.

(e) In an episode from the probably fourteenth-century Icelandic *Harðar saga Grímkellsonar* ‘Saga of Hörðr Grímkellson’, the eponymous hero and a Gotlandic prince called *Hróarr* (cognate with OE *Hroðgar*) set out to raid the burial-mound of an undead viking with magical powers called *Sóti* ‘Sooty’. Outside the mound Hörðr told another companion, Geirr, that he should *hafi með sér eld ok vax,—‘því at hvárttveggja hefir mikla náttúru með sér’ ‘have with him fire and wax—“because each has great powers integrally”*. Hörðr then entered using a sword given to him by a certain Björn ‘Bear’ (thought to be Óðinn incognito, but compare Beowulf as ‘Bee-Wolf’, i.e., ‘Bear’?), while Hróarr remained outside. Inside, Hörðr and Geirr felt an earthquake before the lights went out. They noticed, however, a *skrimingr lítill* ‘little glimmer’, by which they discerned their foe. After exchanging verses, Hörðr and Sóti wrestled, until Hörðr told Geirr *tendra vaxkertit ok vita, hve Sóta brygði við þat. En er ljósit bar yfir Sóta, ómætti hann, ok fell hann niðr* ‘to light the wax-candle and find out how Sóti would react to that. And when the light came over Sóti, he lost his strength and fell down.’ When Hörðr told Geirr to bring the light again, Sóti disappeared into ground. Hörðr then took
Sóti’s sword and helmet, which were *innu mestu gersimar* ‘the greatest treasures’.\(^{202}\) This story is ostensibly heathen, but its paganism may be superficial, as the crucial candle suggests Christianity.\(^{203}\) At any rate, if Óðinn’s gift of a sword (which is not used to fight Sóti)\(^{204}\) corresponds to Unferð’s loan of Hrunting (which proves useless against Grendel’s mother),\(^ {205}\) this encourages comparison of the conquering candle to the radiant giant sword, even if the correspondence is blurred by Hórðr’s separate taking of Sóti’s splendid blade.

---

\(^{202}\) Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Harðar saga*, 43.

\(^{203}\) This is also the view of Binns, ‘Story’, 58–9.


\(^{205}\) As well as being donors of ‘useless’ swords, Óðinn and Unferð are both kinslayers and instigators of strife. Additionally, as Óðinn is a *þulr* ‘sage’ in the Eddic poem *Hávamál* ‘The Sayings of Háv’i’ (80, 111, 134, 142), so Unferð is a *þyle* ‘orator, spokesman, sage’ in *Beowulf* (1165, 1456).