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

Edward Pettit
5. Whose Sword Is it, Anyway?

So far, I have proposed that the giant sword of *Beowulf* is a likely weapon of solar radiance, one that intimates two potent symbols of Christianity: the candle (possibly more specifically the Paschal Candle) and the Cross. It might, however, be objected that a Christian poet would not equate his religion’s prime symbols with a weapon forged and possessed by devilish giants. Two main responses may be offered to such an objection.

The first is simply that the Cross was also considered the weapon of evil-doers. It too was a weapon which Christ similarly turned against Satan.

The second is that although the giant sword was kept by giants and forged by giants (*giganta geweorc*, 1562), and although giants often die by their own weapons,¹ this does not necessarily mean that this weapon was originally or rightfully theirs. It seems to me possible, even probable, that they stole or arrogated the sword and then hung it on their wall as a trophy. After all, neither Grendel nor his mother use this sword, or even attempt to, and its destiny was clearly to slay them. And although one scholar has argued persuasively that the sword’s hilt was probably inscribed with words describing Cain’s murder of Abel, it does not necessarily follow that the sword

¹ For Norse instances, see D. J. Beard, ‘Á þá bitu engi járn: A Brief Note on the Concept of Invulnerability in the Old Norse Sagas’, in P. M. Tilling (ed.), Studies in English Language and Early Literature in Honour of Paul Christophersen ([n.p.] New University of Ulster, 1981), 13–31. In the Old Testament there is the notable example of the unique sword of the Philistine giant Goliath, which David—a ‘type’ of Christ—took to behead him (*1 Samuel* 17:51; *1 Samuel* 21:9); on this weapon, see S. Isser, *The Sword of Goliath: David in Heroic Literature* (Leiden, 2003), 34–7. Recall also the beheading of Holofernes by Judith, although in the Old English poem *Judith* (unlike its Biblical source and a homily by Ælfric on this story) it is not explicitly his own sword that beheads him.
was forged and inscribed by giant-smiths ‘to celebrate and advance the malice of God’s enemies’. Furthermore, the gold of the sword’s prominent hilt invites—but obviously in no way proves— attribution to a divine origin, since gold is commonly associated with divinity. We may compare, for example, Jeremiah’s presentation to Judah/Judas of a holy sword of gold, a gift from God, with which to destroy his enemies in 2 Maccabees 15:11–6, almost at the juncture of the Old and New Testaments in the Vulgate Bible.

**Giant-Forged and Giant-Stolen?**

There are several questions concerning the giant, probably sun-like sword: who first owned it? Who was its rightful owner? And why did giants forge it? *Beowulf* offers no clear answers. In probing the matter, I therefore do not intend to answer these questions definitively, but rather to provide some illumination. The poet appears enigmatic, even evasive, on this matter, I suggest, because he wanted to blur the distinction between different extra-Biblical Christian and pagan Germanic traditions (these last to be examined later in this study). To have identified the precise nature of the hilt’s inscription, or to have named the giant sword’s original owner, would have unbalanced his fusion of Judaeo-Christian and Germanic by emphasizing one or the other. I believe he wanted to encourage rumination on the congruences of Christian and heathen Germanic traditions. By remaining vague, he enables both perspectives to co-exist and confers a powerful focus and a sense of mystery upon the sword’s hilt.

This dual perspective appears operative in his description of the sword’s creators. These are initially devouring Scandinavian giants, *eotenas*, like Grendel: the giant sword is introduced as an *ealdsweord eotenisc* ‘eoten-ish old-sword’ (1558). But the poem’s giants, as descendants of Cain, also have a Biblical, etymologically Latinate

---

2 D. Cronan, ‘Origin’, 66. Cf. McNelis III, ‘Sword Mightier than the Pen?’, 177–8: ‘that the sword came out of the water does not prove that it originated there. The lair in *Beowulf* strongly resembles the troll-cave or grave-mound of the analogous passages in other tales of this type. In those versions of the story, the ground is littered with treasures looted from earlier victims or buried in (human) graves.’

3 See Chapter 4 n. 64. Its hilt is not explicitly the work of giants but *wundorsmiþa* ‘of wonder-smiths’ (1681).
aspect: the same passage soon describes the same weapon as *god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc* ‘good and splendid/well-equipped, the work of giants’ (1562), where *giganta* is a Latin loanword. This is an arresting combination because at least some *gigantas* ‘giants’ (not necessarily all) were earlier identified not as good beings, but as evil-doers who had warred against God for a long time (113–4). It seems, then, that a weapon quite possibly made by evil-doers is of great virtue.

How much significance, positive or negative, to attribute to the sword’s manufacture by giants is unclear. It is curious that none of the ‘giantish’ swords and pieces of armour mentioned in *Beowulf* are wielded by (non-human) giants: neither the giant sword, which is *ealdsweord eotonisc … giganta geweorc … enta ærgeweorc* ‘a giantish old-sword … the work of giants … the early work of giants’ (1558, 1562, 1679); nor the *ealdsweord eotonisc* wielded by Wiglaf (2616); nor the *ealdsweord eotonisc* which broke the *entiscne helm* ‘giantish helm’ of the Swedish king Ongenpeow (2979).\(^4\) Since, of these items, only the giant sword is explicitly of giantish manufacture, the other swords and the helmet might just be ‘giant-like/giant-sized’. Possibly it was simply honorific convention to describe the best and oldest arms and armour, wielded by the greatest men, as ‘giantish’, ‘the work of giants’.

On the other hand, if we do attribute considerable significance to the giant sword’s manufacture by giants, a key detail may be that its hilt is *rihte gemearcod* ‘rightly marked’ (1695) with a runic inscription about the

---

4 Additionally, the dragon’s den is *enta geweorc* ‘the work of giants’ (2717) and the dragon’s hoard *eald enta geweorc* ‘the old work of giants’. For a study of such phrases, see P. J. Frankis, ‘The Thematic Significance of *Enta Geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*, *ASE* 2 (1973), 253–69. Frankis observes that in *Beowulf* ‘the *entas* seem to be creatures similar in function to the dwarves of Norse myth as workers in metal and makers of treasures’ (254). In a Norse saga discussed in Chapter 14 we may meet one such metal-working ‘giant’ in an episode analogous to Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother: A troll-woman called *Sleggja* ‘Sledgehammer’. Some other giants whom we shall encounter have names containing *Járn* ‘Iron’ or live in *Járnviðr* ‘Iron-Wood’.

5 F. Battaglia, ‘Cannibalism in *Beowulf* and Older Germanic Religion’, in G. R. Owen-Crocker and B. W. Schneider (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons: The World Through Their Eyes* (Oxford, 2014), 141–8 at 145–6 considers that the indication that the *eotenas* made the best of ancient swords in a poem in which ‘the *eotenas* themselves were objects of hatred … suggests that a struggle about interpreting the past was still under way when the poem was composed. The power of *eotenis swords may have been a stock motif of Germanic lore, not yet modified in light of a new framework about *eotenas* being asserted in the poem.’
or .../ fyrgewinnes ‘origin ... of ancient strife’ (1688–9). When, by whom and why this inscription was made is open to question. The exact subject of the inscription is another enigma, but, as just noted, Cain’s murder of Abel seems likely from a Judaeo-Christian perspective. Did Old Testament giants forge the sword and inscribe its hilt in celebration of this crime after it had been committed? Or did they do so in anticipation of the crime? Was the giant sword the very weapon with which Cain weard / to ecgbanan ‘became edge/sword-slayer’ (1261–2) of Abel? And could evil giants be said to have marked the sword rihte ‘rightly’? These questions arise as a result of the poet’s deliberate imprecision, which means they cannot be answered conclusively.

What we may quickly observe, however, is that giants apparently can ‘mark’ in Beowulf. The hero raises the possibility that Grendel would eat him and in the process mearcad morhopu ‘mark (his) moor-retreats’ (450), presumably with blood, but what form these marks would take—random, meaningless gore-splatters or ritualized blood-runes—is anyone’s guess. The poem’s more prominent ‘marker’, though, is God. He had forscrefen ‘written off/proscribed’ (106) Grendel as one of the kin of Cain, who after killing Abel had fled morþre gemearcod ‘marked by murder’ (1264).

6  J. B. Himes (ed. and trans.), The Old English Epic of Waldere (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), 107 n. 14, for example, remarks: ‘The fact that hilts were not fashioned as part of the original blade (not connected to the lower tang but crafted separately and applied later) would explain how the giants’ sword contains the tale of its own makers’ demise. If the blade had been forged by the ancient race of giants, surviving their destruction by flood but later recognized as that legendary weapon, then artisans after the flood could have inscribed its history on a newly fashioned hilt for it.’ I doubt, however, that the giant sword does contain such a tale.

7  Note that rihte bears the line’s main alliterative stress and therefore some emphasis.

8  For Battaglia, ‘Cannibalism in Beowulf’, 144 this ‘sounds as if Grendel conducts bog rituals with human corpses’.

9  Anglo-Saxon literature also preserves a tradition that the person who aerost bocstafas settle ‘first set (down) book-staves [i.e., Latinate letters, not runes]’ (compare Beowulf’s runstafas ... geseted ... aerest) or who wrat bocstafas aerest ‘wrote book-staves first’ was Mercurius se gygand/gigant ‘Mercury the giant’; see J. E. Cross and T. D. Hill (ed.), The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus (Toronto, 1982), 34, 36, with commentary on 122–3. This Mercury is Hermes Trismegistus, but note also the equation of the Roman god Mercury with the Migration Age form of Woden/Óðinn in the interpretatio germanica. Óðinn, whose ancestors included a giant, was the lord of runes.

10  On the significance of marking in Beowulf, see Sharma, ‘Metalepsis and Monstrosity’. All of the poem’s main monsters are implicitly undone by writing, a form of marking. Grendel was forscrefen ‘written off/proscribed’ (106) by God as one of the
mother, the poet describes God as one who controls sæla ond mæla (1611), a phrase interpretable broadly as ‘time and seasons’, but more literally as ‘good times and mark(ers)’.

It is one thing to consider attributing runic literacy to giants, but potentially quite another to state that in inscribing a terrible crime the giants had written rightly. A simplistic, literal-minded interpretation might take rihte simply to mean that the giants had spelt their words correctly (unlike many a historical rune-carver). This, though, would be blind to the sword’s paramount role in executing divine ‘right/justice’ (ryht, 1555). Accordingly, the giants could only be said to have inscribed rightly in hindsight, by someone with faith in the workings of divine providence. In the fullness of time, when Beowulf wielded the giant sword, it might then be appreciated that the giants had unknowingly anticipated the will of God—had done the right thing—by marking the weapon destined to destroy the last of their race with the justification for their eradication. The unjust weapon of the enemy would become the just weapon of God.

race of Cain, on whom God had famously left a ‘mark’. Grendel and his mother were beheaded by the rune-inscribed giant sword, which was ‘marked’. And in using his short-sword to kill the dragon that had ravaged his kingdom, Beowulf forwrat … wyrm on middan ‘wrote apart’ the worm in the middle’ (2705). Some of the poem’s less important monsters may also have been ‘written’ to death, though much less obviously. It seems likely that the hildebill ‘battle-bill’, the deoran sweorde ‘dear sword’ (with a pun on ‘beast-sword’?), with which Beowulf slew the mighty meredeor ‘mighty mere-beast’ during his swimming-match with Breca is identifiable as the wægsweord ‘wave-sword’ which he entrusted to Unferð before diving into the mere. This sword is most likely a double of the giant sword, and therefore had to be out of the hero’s hands for the poet to continue his narrative (note that Drout et al., Beowulf Unlocked, 62 finds that there is evidence ‘to support the idea that the Unferth and Breca material has a source different from the rest of Beowulf’). The giant sword, we have seen, was inscribed with writing (it is the only explicitly literary object in the poem), while the sword which Unferð received from Beowulf is an ealde lafe, wrætlic wægsweord … heardecg ‘old leaving/heirloom, an ornamented wave-sword … a hard edge’ (1488–90), in which wrætlic ‘ornamented’, from wrætt ‘ornament’, ‘work of art’, is related to writan ‘to write, score, incise’. For its part, Sigemund’s swurd þurhwod wrætlicne wyrm, þæt hit on wealle ætstod, dryhtlic iren ‘sword penetrated through the wrætlic worm, so that it stood in the wall, the lordly iron’ (890–2). It is conceivable that Sigemund’s dragon is fleetingly imagined as an inscribed trophy hanging from a wall—like the giant sword before it melted. For its part, Grendel’s head, severed by the giant sword, is also wrætlic (1650). In Beowulf, it seems, the pen (or incising tool) is not so much mightier than the sword, as identified with the sword.

That is one possibility, but another explanation of the giants’ possession of a rightly inscribed sword also appears attractive as it accounts for neglected indications in *Beowulf* and its analogues that Grendel and his mother were sword-thieves. We noted the most important internal indications of this earlier: the description of Grendel as a *heorowearh* ‘sword-thief’ (1267) (if this translation is accepted) and his mother as *heorogifre* ‘sword-greedy’ (1498). I shall adduce other such indications in due course.\(^\text{12}\)

We shall also see on the basis of analogues in Old Norse and Old English texts that, from one perspective, in the back-story to *Beowulf* Grendel may well have stolen the giant sword—possibly from its Danish guardians in Heorot—partly to satisfy his desire, and that of his mother, as alien beings identified with the moon, for sunlight. And if Grendel and his mother were sword-thieves, it would seem likely that the sun-like giant sword which enacts divine justice upon them:

(a) Was originally the rightful possession, not of evil giants, but of a benign solar deity, one tacitly identified with the Christian God the Father, whose radiant son overcame devils with a divine sword during the Harrowing of Hell.\(^\text{13}\)

(b) Had been made and inscribed for this deity by giants, who were perhaps evil at the time or subsequently became so. Notably, amid the hilt’s description, the words *geworht ... / ærest wære* ‘made ... was first’ (1696–7)—with alliterative stress on *ærest* ‘first’—imply a change of ownership for the giant sword, though not necessarily between opposing parties.

(c) Was stolen or arrogated and kept by Grendel and his mother, but never used by them, because they knew it was destined to destroy them.\(^\text{14}\)

Such knowledge of the fatal threat from a sword would explain the magical spell which Grendel cast on *sigewæpnum* ‘victorious weapons’

\(^\text{12}\) Christian crosses, it may be added, were also the subject of theft-narratives in Anglo-Saxon England; see Dubois, *Nordic Religions*, 143.

\(^\text{13}\) In probably the oldest surviving vernacular Anglo-Saxon account of the Harrowing of Hell, the late eighth- or ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* describes Christ as a bright light who strikes devils with his *godcunde sweorde* ‘divine sword’; see C. Rauer (ed.), *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge, 2013), 74.

\(^\text{14}\) Cf. Nagler, *’Beowulf’*, 146.
Whose Sword Is it, Anyway?

(804), so that even the irenna cyst ‘choicest of iron weapons’ (802) might not harm him. It would also account for his refusal to wield a sword himself (677–87); instead of brandishing the giant sword that hung on his wall, he uses his terrible arm and nailed hand, which, I shall later propose, the poet may subtly identify with grim relish as an ‘un/bad-sword’ (unheoru 987). That Grendel had the giant sword especially in mind when he cast his spell may be suggested by this weapon’s introduction as sigeeadig ‘victory-eager’ (1557) and wæpna cyst ‘the choicest of weapons’ (1559). We have, furthermore, already seen that Snarvendill, a likely Old Norse counterpart to this sword, was made by dwarves, relatives of giants, and potentially held by Vargeisa unrightfully. Greek mythology may also supply a pertinent parallel in the Cyclopes’ forging of Zeus’ thunderbolts, which were later stolen by the giant Typhoeus (after a tip-off from his mother, Gaia) and hidden in a cave, before eventually being recovered.

In this way, giants who were evil, or who subsequently became so, could have forged and rightly marked the good giant sword. And, given that all things were deemed to be under God’s control and that he evidently intended the giant sword to slay its captors and then return to Heorot, this weapon might also be subtly described from this perspective as þas lænan gesceaft ‘this loaned creation’ (1622).

The Giant Sword and the Theft of Mjöllnir

If the giant-made giant sword was indeed stolen by giants from a solar god or his people before being recovered by Beowulf, these events would appear comparable not just to those concerning Zeus’ thunderbolts.

---

15 Earlier, Beowulf says he has heard that Grendel for his weonhydum wæpna ne recceð (434) ‘on account of his recklessness does not care for [or ‘about’] weapons’, but this is hearsay, not the poet’s authoritative explanation.

16 If the supernatural swordsmith Weland, mentioned in Beowulf and other Old English texts, were a giant, this would strengthen perception of a Germanic tradition about the making of swords by such creatures. Weland is associated with a megalithic (‘giant stone’) tomb in Oxfordshire: Wayland’s Smithy. His father, Wade, appears in Old Norse as the giant Vaði; see W. McConnell, The Wate Figure in Medieval Tradition (Berne, 1978). However, the Old Norse Vǫlundr is an álfa lýði ‘prince of elves’ in the Eddic poem Vǫlundarkviða ‘Vǫlundr’s Poem’ (10).


They would also call to mind those involving Mjöllnir ‘Crusher’, the dwarf-forged lightning-hammer of Pórr.\textsuperscript{19}

According to the Old Norse Eddic poem \textit{Þrymskviða} ‘The Lay of Þrymr’, Mjöllnir was stolen (quite possibly by the trickster-god Loki) and kept in deep concealment underground by the giant Þrymr ‘Thunderous One’\textsuperscript{20}. There it remained until Pórr went to recover it, accompanied by Loki. Despite being ludicrously disguised as the goddess Freyja, Pórr succeeded in reacquiring his weapon and immediately used it to slay both Þrymr and the giant’s anonymous sister in their home.\textsuperscript{21}

Helen Damico has shown the likely relevance of \textit{Þrymskviða} to the middle section of \textit{Beowulf}, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{22} She argues that these poems are bound together by ‘the strength of the Nordic literary tradition’, and that the Old English poem ‘serves as an index to the [Old Norse] lay’s comic mode’.\textsuperscript{23} She observes similarities in their narrative structures, with Grendel’s mother, as thief of Grendel’s severed hand, corresponding to the giant Þrymr who guards Pórr’s stolen hammer (or rather, I suggest, to his acquisitive sister). In my view, however, Damico goes too far when equating the giant sword with Mjöllnir on the supposed basis of a similarity of shape.\textsuperscript{24} Even if the giant sword were curved and hook-tipped (for which there is no convincing evidence),

\textsuperscript{19} For further thoughts on the relationships of Mjöllnir and other divine instruments of Norse mythology to the Cross, see Dubois, \textit{Nordic Religions}, 158–63.


\textsuperscript{23} Damico, ‘\textit{Þrymskviða}’, 423.

\textsuperscript{24} Damico, ‘\textit{Þrymskviða}’, 421–2.
and even if both it and Mjöllnir had hilts furnished with a ring, it seems to me rather far-fetched to liken the sword’s overall form to ‘the double-axed thunderbolt of Zeus’. Simply put, a sword is neither a hammer nor an axe. Although the giant sword’s form comes closer to that of Mjöllnir once it has been reduced to its hilt, we do better, I think, to consider the giant sword and Mjöllnir broadly equivalents as large, heavy weapons of heavenly light, the former solar, the latter (originally at least) fulgural, wielded by comparable champions associated with the weather. It is likely, in my view, that either weapon was stolen or illicitly kept by a giant who lived with, and was perhaps prompted by, a giantess, before being recovered by a champion of supernatural strength, who immediately used it to kill the thieves.

**The Cup-Thief, Grendel’s Glove and Grendel’s ‘Un-Sword’: Aspects of Recurrent Thievery in Beowulf**

If the theft of the giant sword is implicit, essentially hidden in the background, and therefore open to question, perception of its likelihood may strengthen with the appreciation that thievery—as distinct from the apparently sanctioned practice of spoliation after open warfare (see below)—is a recurrent theme in Beowulf. It is an important aspect of each of the poem’s three main monster-episodes, in each of which it is prominently associated with a hand or hands.

The most obvious instance of theft in Beowulf is the last and most catastrophic: the taking of a precious drinking-cup from the lair of a

---

26 With regard to Mjöllnir’s weight, a Norwegian ballad refers to *Thor með tungum hamrum* ‘Thor with heavy hammer’; M. B. Landstad (ed.), *Norske folkeviser* (Christiania, 1853), 14; L. Korecká, ‘Óðin stoyttist í jörðina niður: Magic and Myth in the Faroese Ballads’, *Arv* 73 (2017), 91–113 at 99 considers this detail ‘a remnant of an older, forgotten tradition’.
27 Beowulf is a member of the *Weder-Geatas* ‘We(a)ther-Geats’, one who *styrmde* ‘stormed’ at a dragon (2552); cf. Fontenrose, *Python*, 64 on the interchangeability of champions’ weapons in related myths. Since the hilt of the giant sword is prominent in Beowulf, it is of interest that the handles of one or two of Þórr’s weapons are also conspicuous in one or two myths. According to the story of the creation of the gods’ treasures by dwarves, Loki’s meddling resulted in Mjöllnir having a defect: *forskeptit var heldr skamt* ‘the end of the handle [or perhaps the part of the shaft that went through the head of the weapon] was rather short’; *SnESkáld*, I, 42. Elsewhere, the thunder-god’s oaken club is rendered useless by having its handle cut off; *GD*, I, 152–3.
sleeping dragon by the *hond* ‘hand’ (2216) of a man, by *þeofes crafte* ‘thief’s craft’ (2219). This event and the dragon’s sudden revenge, which leads to the hero’s death and the seemingly unavoidable destruction of his kingdom, suggest a fiery apocalypse. To an audience familiar with basic Christian analogy, this would also call to mind a thief, given that the day of the Lord would come *ut fur* ‘as a thief’, with element-destroying heat (2 Peter 3:10; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Revelation 3:3, 16:15).

Whether or not he stole the giant sword, Grendel is also a thief in the first third of *Beowulf*. He effectively stole food, in the form of men, from Heorot by night, by approaching and attacking while people slept. Those whom he did not devour on the spot, like the peculiarly named *Hondscioh* ‘Hand-Shoe [i.e., Glove]’ (2076–80), he stuffed inside his *glof* ‘glove’ and carried home. Judging by the contents of his lair, he probably also took their weapons and armour (*searwum*, 1557). This, *Beowulf* says, is what Grendel intended to do with him:

Glof hangode,
  sid ond sylic, searobendum fast;
sio wæs orðoncum eall gegyrwed
deofles crafte ond dracan fellum.
He mec þær on innan unsynnigne,
dior dædruma, gedon wolde
  manigra sumne.’ (2085–91)

‘A glove hung, broad and strange, secure with cunningly wrought bands; it was by skills [literally ‘original thoughts’] all equipped with a/the devil’s powers and with a dragon’s skins. He, the brave deed-originator [or ‘beast of deed-originators’], wanted to put me, guiltless, inside there, as one of many.’

Grendel’s *glof* apparently served a dual purpose. Unless we attribute this word the unique sense ‘bag’, it was principally a ‘glove’, presumably for his remarkable, weapon-like hand. As such, rather than providing warmth, it may have served chiefly to protect against unintended injury to himself or his mother, and to prevent rust. Its secondary use was as a swag-bag, potentially not just for food. Especially if the glove did serve as a cover for Grendel’s pointed weapon of a hand, given that it was

---

29 See KB, 233.
fastened by presumably supernatural power and made from dragon-skin—a remarkable hide which contained and resisted fire—it would seem a highly suitable substitute bag in which to place a stolen solar sword. Allowing for some differences of detail, Grendel’s glove probably finds parallel in both the hanzki ‘mitten’ (compare Hondscioh) and the nestbaggí ‘food-bag’ of the giant Skrýmir ‘Big-Looking One(?)’30 (alias Útgarða-Loki), described one after the other in a tale from Gylfaginning ‘The Beguiling of Gylfi’, part of Snorri’s Prose Edda.31 This story relates that Þórr mistook Skrýmir’s glove for a house and spent a wakeful, fearful night in its thumb, along with his companions and his lightning-hammer. The next morning Þórr and Skrýmir pooled their provisions in the latter’s bag, which Þórr later failed to open because, we eventually learn, the giant had bundit með grésjárni ‘bound it with handicraft-iron’.32 As Skrýmir is also attested as a term for ‘sword’,33 might this bag once have held a sword?

That leaves Beowulf’s middle section, and Grendel’s mother, whose taking of her son’s severed arm (and Æschere) Helen Damico has commented on (see above). There is more to be said about it, however. Judging from Anglo-Saxon laws, the periodic sounding of a horn by the men who, having passed a boundary stone, entered the land of Grendel and his mother (1423–4, 1431–2), signalled that they (unlike the giants) did not come covertly as thieves.34 Although the reposssession of

---

30 On this name, see Chapter 14 n. 112.
32 SnEGylf, 43; on the uncertain meaning of grésjárni, see ibid., 102. Þórr’s failure to open the bag is also alluded to in the Eddic poem Lokasenna ‘Loki’s Flyting’ (62), in which Skrýmir could be the name of either the giant or his bag. I shall have more to say about Loki, who appears in this story both as one of Þórr’s companions and, seemingly, as Skrýmir’s alter ego.
33 See SnESkáld, I, 118, II, 507; Falk, Altnordische Waffenkunde, 59; PTP, 791–2. In two thirteenth-century Icelandic texts, Kormáks saga and Egils saga, it is the name of a special sword named after the giant.
34 See W. Cooke, ‘Two Notes on Beowulf (With Glances at Vafþruðnismál, Blickling Homily 16, and Andreas, Lines 839–846)’, MÆ 72 (2003), 297–301 at 299. Similarly, Beowulf openly declares his presence to the dragon by issuing a mighty warcry (2550–3). Consequently, Wiglaf’s acquisition of treasures from the hoard is an act not of theft, but of legitimate ‘reaving’ (reafian 2773; cf. bereafod 2746, 2825). For a different interpretation, which compares Christ as thief with Beowulf as plunderer of the dragon’s hoard, see Helder, ‘Beowulf and the Plundered Hoard’.
Grendel’s arm doubtless seemed justified to his mother, it is probably identifiable as a theft not just because the giants are inherently evil, but more precisely because Grendel’s loss corresponded to a just legal punishment for theft.35 Since, as I shall now suggest, the poet likens Grendel’s arm, or each of its nails, to a pointed weapon, it is conceivable that its seizure by Beowulf on behalf of the Danes amounted to a just reciprocation for Grendel’s theft of the giant sword from the Danes.

After describing how Hroðgar geseah ‘saw’ (926) Grendel’s severed right arm,36 and how the king thanked God for the marvel of Grendel’s defeat, and after giving Beowulf’s account of his victory, the poet continues:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Da wæs swigra secg,} & \quad \text{sunu Eclafes,} \\
\text{on gylpspræce} & \quad \text{guðgeweorca,} \\
\text{sipðan æpeliningas} & \quad \text{eorles cæfte} \\
\text{ofer heanne hrof} & \quad \text{hand sceawedon,} \\
\text{feondes fingras;} & \quad \text{foran æghwylc wæs,} \\
\text{steda nægla gehwylc} & \quad \text{style gelicost,} \\
\text{hæþenes handsporu,} & \quad \text{hilderinces,} \\
\text{egl’ unheoru.} & \quad \text{Æghwylc gecwæð} \\
\text{þæt him heardra nan} & \quad \text{hrinan wolde} \\
\text{iren ærgod,} & \quad \text{þæt ðæs ahlæcan} \\
\text{blodge beadufolme} & \quad \text{onberan wolde. (980–90)}
\end{align*}
\]

Then the man, Ec(g)laf’s son [i.e., Unferð], was quieter in boasting of battle-deeds, when princes, on account of the strength of the nobleman [i.e., Beowulf], gazed upon the hand across the high roof, the enemy’s fingers; in front each, each of the places of nails, was just like steel, the hand-spur(?) of a heathen, of a battle-man—horrible(?), unpleasant [or ‘a horrible un-/


36 A prefiguring of Hroðgar’s gazing on the severed hilt of the giant sword. That the severed arm was Grendel’s right arm—normally the stronger and therefore the sword-arm—is revealed by Beowulf in 2098–9.
5. Whose Sword Is it, Anyway?

bad-sword’]. Each (man) said that no iron of hard men, good from days of old, would touch it, such that it would carry off/harm the monster’s bloody battle-hand.

This passage, although comprehensible, presents various obscurities that might indicate textual corruption. Clearly, however, it characterizes the hand of Grendel—the giant who did not wield swords and who employed magic to prevent them injuring him—as a substitute weapon. Furthermore, it seems to me that in unheoru, the climactic word of the first sentence, there is wordplay on *unheoru ‘un-/bad-sword’. The pun has been prepared for, as earlier the sword-less Grendel had left Heorot stained with heorudreore ‘sword-blood’ (487); the same word also describes the gore that gushed from Grendel’s body after losing his arm (849); and when gazing at Grendel’s severed arm, Hroðgar had recalled the time when Grendel had left Heorot heorodreorig ‘sword-bloody’ (935). The fact that ON hnefi ‘fist’ is a poetic term for a sword, and ON benknúar ‘wound-knuckles’ and blóðhnefi ‘blood-fist’ denote a part or parts of a sword (perhaps one with a pommel resembling knuckles), offers encouragement for this interpretation, as do episodes in two Old Norse sagas.

First is Hjálmpés saga and the juxtaposed functional equivalence of a troll-woman’s iron-clawed arms and the hero’s sword, Snarvendill, in a stanza quoted in Chapter 7.

---

37 See KB, 175.
38 In Chapter 14 I relate Grendel’s arm and hand to an Old Norse wolfish troll’s pitchfork and a giant’s destructive boathook.
39 *Unheoru ‘un-/bad-sword’ would be comparable in construction to untydras ‘bad brood/evil offspring’ (111), another hapax legomenon applicable to Grendel, who is also a creature of unhaelo ‘unwholesomeness, evil’ (120). Cf., in Chapter 10, my proposal of similar wordplay on heoru ‘sword’ in nis þæt heoru stow ‘that is not a pleasant/sword place’ (1372). With Grendel’s nails as implicit sword-hooks, perhaps compare the heorohocghtum ‘sword-hooked’ boar-spears used to capture one of the creatures in his mere (1438). For other interpretations of Grendel’s arm as a sword, see Damico, ‘Þrymskviða’, 409, 426 n. 16. Later in the poem, Grendel’s mother is described as unhyre ‘unpleasant’ (2120) and the dragon as unhire (2413).
40 Cf. Hroðgar’s description of Grendel’s head as heorodreorigne ‘sword-bloody’ (1780), after its severing by the giant sword. Note, too, how Wiglaf bathed mid handa heorodreorigne ‘with his hands the sword-bloody one [i.e., Beowulf]’ (2720) as the hero lay mortally wounded by the fire-dragon which breathed sword-like hildeleoman ‘battle-lights’ (2583) and which was killed by sword and knife.
41 PTP, 796, 798, 808–9; cf. also, perhaps, the threat by a Grendel-like giant called Hárekr to use his hnefi as a weapon in a saga-episode discussed in Chapter 14.
Second is the fourteenth-century *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* ‘Saga of Egill the One-Handed and Ásmundr, Slayer of Berserks’. Chapter 11 describes how a dwarf had forged a prosthetic sword to replace the severed hand of a man called Egill (from Götlaland), which had been cut off in a fight with a giant.\(^{42}\) Earlier, in chapters 3 and 4, Egill, complete with prosthetic sword, shows similarities to Grendel when attacking Heorot and fighting Beowulf. Egill, we learn, was raiding the lands of King Hertryggr of Russia, and had killed some of his men. Before dying, one of Egill’s victims declared that no men could stand against the blows of his prosthetic sword. However, a Norwegian called Ásmundr ‘God-Hand’ (compare the divinely assisted and mighty-handed Beowulf) came over the sea and offered to defend the king. He fought Egill (the first element of whose name may be related to the first element of OE *aglæca*/*æglæca* ‘awe/terror-inspiring one’,\(^{43}\) a term used more than once of Grendel). During the fight, Ásmundr threw away his sword, leapt at Egill and wrestled with him (compare Beowulf’s renouncing of a sword before wrestling with Grendel, and his subsequent discarding of Hrunting before wrestling with Grendel’s mother). Eventually he overthrew Egill. Ásmundr then went to retrieve his sword and kill Egill, but was so impressed that Egill simply lay calmly where he was that he spared his life. The two became sworn-brothers. Subsequently, in chapter 5, they met a briefly hostile giantess called Skinnefja ‘Skin-Nose’\(^{44}\) and her mother Arinnefja ‘Eagle-Nose’. The latter is described as a *kerling* ‘old woman’, but as she ruled over *jötunheimar* ‘Giant-Homes’ she was evidently also a giantess.\(^{45}\) Later still, in chapter 14, Arinnefja reattaches Egill’s severed limb, which she had preserved\(^{46}\) (compare Grendel’s mother’s seizure of his severed arm, although she is not said to have reattached it).

However we interpret *unheoru* in *Beowulf*, Grendel’s arm-weapon is apparently attached to the outside of Heorot’s intact roof, where it serves as a trophy and contrasts with the immediately following

\(^{42}\) *FSN*, III, 348.

\(^{43}\) The same word describes Beowulf, Sigemund and the dragon; see Lapidge, ‘*Beowulf* and the Psychology’, 380–1.

\(^{44}\) Cf. *Skinnhufa* ‘Skin-Hood’ in Hjálmpes saga.

\(^{45}\) *FSN*, III, 327–34.

\(^{46}\) *FSN*, III, 354–5. In chapter 17, the dwarf Reginn makes a handle for the redundant prosthetic, which becomes a *góðr gripr* ‘good treasure’; *ibid.*, 362.
137
5. Whose Sword Is it, Anyway?

decoration of the hall’s destroyed interior folhum ‘with hands’ (992). Its suspension also prefigures that of the giant sword on the wall of Grendel’s submerged hall—a weapon which, at its moment of triumph, is similarly characterized as an extension of Beowulf’s arm. It may be suggested that rather as Beowulf’s good giant sword (which Grendel may have wrongly seized with his un/bad-sword) becomes figuratively Beowulf’s arm, so, inversely, Grendel’s arm (which Beowulf rightly seized with his arm) becomes figuratively Grendel’s un/bad-sword.

The Basis for Detecting Germanic Myth in Beowulf

We have already related one Norse myth about a thunder-god’s loss and recovery of his hammer to the potential theft of the giant sword in Beowulf. In the following chapters in Part II I draw on other Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon nature-myths to provide comparative support for my proposal of a basis for the giant sword, its original owner, its theft by giants, and its recovery by Beowulf in antagonistic dealings between the sun and the moon and their representatives. Many of these myths may well have heathen Germanic origins akin to those that, I believe, lie behind Beowulf and coexist with the giant sword’s apparent roots in the Judaeo-Christian world of Cain and Abel and the Flood.

47 If Heorot were surmounted by antlers, Grendel’s arm would also contrast with them (see Chapter 10).

Such a basis in Germanic mythology would be in keeping with the following points:

(a) The fantastic nature of the probably sun-like giant sword and its supernaturally strong Scandinavian wielder, Beowulf.

(b) The interest of preceding texts in Cotton Vitellius A.xv in marvels relating to the sun and moon.

(c) The giant sword’s location in a Danish mere suggestive of the Lake of the Moon in Wonders.

(d) The presentation of the giant sword’s hilt to Hroðgar, a heathen Danish king, in a hall with likely solar associations.

(e) The giant sword’s use to slay Norse giants, which were sometimes associated, even identified, with the moon, and sometimes slain by the first rays of the sun.

(f) The existence of many other parallels between Beowulf and Old Norse texts containing passages that probably either derive elements from, or were originally, nature-myths.

(g) The ancient mythical background to Beowulf’s monster-fights identified by Joseph Fontenrose.49

(h) Lastly, but potentially most importantly, the possibility proposed by Bo Gräslund that much of Beowulf—its story, setting and personages—reflects a pagan poem of East Scandinavia in the late Migration Age.

More specifically, I draw comparisons between Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother and Old English and Old Norse myths about the theft (or unsanctioned possession) and concealment of sunlight by creatures associated with the moon, and that light’s recovery by the sun or one or more solar emissaries. For example, in one Norse myth preserved in Sólarljóð, a thirteenth-century(?) Christian poem, we shall find such light symbolized as a comparable solar weapon—an antler, which, like Beowulf’s giant sword, may also symbolize the Cross. I shall also suggest that Beowulf might allude to such an antler-symbol immediately before the hero enters Grendel’s mere and discovers the giant sword.

Although at least one eminent scholar has taken the view that the *Beowulf*-poet’s ‘knowledge of the pagan practices of his Germanic ancestors and/or their Scandinavian cousins was little more than a vague awareness of what was done “in those days”’—a proposal now contradicted by Gräslund—the Anglo-Saxon poet of a seventh-century or earlier *Beowulf* might be expected to have been familiar with heathen Anglo-Saxon myths, many of which, given a shared Germanic background, probably had much in common with Norse ones. He might also have known some Scandinavian myths. It has, at least, long been appreciated that artefacts from the seventh-century ship-burial in Mound One at Sutton Hoo show strong affinities with the art of Scandinavia and with objects described in *Beowulf*—even if, despite the close similarities, in Gräslund’s view, ‘Sutton Hoo-tid är inte Beowulftid’.

Most famous among these is the impressive masked helmet, which may well represent the head of the Norse god Óðinn and/or his Old English cognate Woden. What is undeniable is that *Beowulf* takes a deep interest in, and knows much about, other aspects of the heathen Germanic past, including its legendary heroes. The poem’s dragon-slaying hero Sigemund, for instance, reappears in the thirteenth-century Old Norse *Völsunga saga* ‘Saga of the Völsungar’ as Sigmundr, recipient of the sword of Óðinn.

If, as now seems unlikely, *Beowulf* were composed later, during the Viking Age, its poet might have learned of heathen Scandinavian myths from the many Norsemen who settled in England. Old Norse skaldic poems reportedly recited in pre-Conquest England mention Norse gods and goddesses—Freyr, Freyja, Óðinn and Hǫðr, among others—and assume knowledge of heathen Norse myths.

---

51 Gräslund, *Beowulfkvädet*, 234 (‘Sutton Hoo-time is not Beowulf-time’).
surviving sculpture shows that Norse gods and myths were known in northern England during the Viking Age, and that they were adapted to Christian contexts.55 The Cumbrian Gosforth Cross, from the first half of the tenth century, shows scenes from a version of Ragnarök, the Norse apocalypse, in which the mythical figures of Óðinn, Viðarr, Loki, Sigyn and Heimdallr are identifiable from their corresponding appearances in Old Norse mythological texts. I examine this monument in detail in Chapter 10 as, despite most likely postdating Beowulf, it preserves relevant myths and provides an impressive example of the accommodation of heathen lunar and solar traditions within an image of the Christian Cross. The Gosforth ‘fishing-stone’ of similar date supplies further evidence by probably depicting the Old Norse myth of Þórr and the giant Hymir angling for the world-serpent; it may be a fragment of a Christian cross.56 Moreover, there is reason to think that some of the surviving mythological Eddic poems, including þrymskviða, were composed or revised in England.57 It seems likely that such poems were the means of transmission of heathen myths to the Gosforth carvers.

Therefore, despite the doubts of some scholars,58 it would seem surprising if the Beowulf-poet was distinctly ignorant of stories involving heathen gods—even if, as a Christian, he would not repeat them openly or without modification. Evidence indicating that he probably was versed in such myths appears in episodes of Beowulf that recur in variant forms in Old Norse mythological texts, less obscurely than in the case of Grendel’s glove. In Beowulf’s account of the hero Hama’s taking of the Broðinga mene ‘torc of the Broðingas’ (1197–201), for example, we apparently have a story that was later told as an Old Norse myth about the seizure of the Brísingamén ‘torc of the Brísingar [‘Blazing/
Whose Sword Is it, Anyway?

Shining Ones’ = dwarves]’ by the god Heimdallr. Similarly, Beowulf’s account of the Geat prince Hæðcyn’s slaying of his brother Herebeald (2435–43) finds likely parallel—as noted by other commentators—in the Old Norse myth of Hór’s killing of his brother, the god Baldur: the Old English and Old Norse personal names are partly cognate. It is probably more likely that the Beowulf-poet has euhemerized such stories, or otherwise veiled their enaction by heathen divinities, for a Christian audience than that the authors of the Old Norse versions should have mythologized them so effectively.

However imprecise these findings may be, they ought to inspire some confidence that Old Norse mythology has the potential to inform our understanding of Beowulf. That is the case despite the many differences inevitably found in myths that relied for their survival chiefly on repeated reinvention through oral transmission, that therefore had no wholly fixed nature, and that took textual form at different times and in different places. For instance, whereas in Beowulf it is Sigemund who slays a dragon, in Old Norse literature this feat is attributed to Sigmundr’s son, Sigurðr: there is agreement that a dragon was slain, but the role of dragon-slayer has been transferred between closely related male characters with similar names. As Heather O’Donoghue has recently observed: ‘as long as we do not expect mythic material which precisely reproduces what has come down to us in Old Norse written sources, we may recognize echoes of Old Norse myth in several different forms in Beowulf.’


60 See KB, xlvii–xlviii.


62 Cf. Dronke, ‘Beowulf’, 325: ‘When early scholars traced the mythological parallels of Beowulf, they did not reckon with the mind of a poet well-versed in Christian apologetic techniques against the pagans, deliberately using, and diminishing the stature of, older myths for his Christian didactic purposes; an imaginative explorer who obliterated most of the tracks of his journey; an ingenious craftsman creating from strangely assorted stones of native tradition a mosaic of symbolic design.’

In pursuit of what is—to borrow a description applied to this type of investigation by the same scholar—a necessarily somewhat ‘speculative endeavour’, in the next chapter I begin to lay the basis for my proposal that a myth involving solar weaponry associated with a Germanic god called Ing may underlie Beowulf’s recovery of the giant sword after beheading Grendel’s mother and Grendel. Ing seems essentially equivalent to the Scandinavian god Ægðr or Ægðr/Ingvi-Freyr, whom we probably also met earlier in late, euhemerized form as Ingi in Hjálmpés saga. In due course we shall find reason to connect this deity with both the giant sword and Hrunting.


O’Donoghue, English Poetry, 24. KB, I puts it more discouragingly: ‘Inquiry into the primitive mythological signification of those preternatural adventures is a daunting undertaking, resting as it must on conjecture and unprovable reconstructions.’

The equivalence of these figures was proposed as early as the nineteenth century. For a detailed modern discussion, see HG. General guides to Norse mythology include J. de Vries, Altgermanisches Religionsgeschichte, 2nd edn. (Berlin, 1956–7); E. O. G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia (London, 1964); R. Simek, Dictionary of Northern Mythology (Cambridge, 1993); C. Abram, Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen (London, 2011).