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

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The possibility—I think probability—of a kinship between Skírnir’s gambanteinn and Beowulf’s submerged giant sword is underlined by another Eddic composition, Svipdagsmál, which bears strong similarities to Frr Skirnis and the quest for Hervör in Hjálmpés saga. It mentions a remarkable teinn-weapon, probably radiant and comparable to Skírnir’s gambanteinn. This weapon, called Lævateinn, seems to have been stolen by Loki and concealed at the bottom of a mighty whirlpool, where it was guarded by a pale giantess suggestive of Grendel’s mother. If this is the case, Svipdagsmál lends comparative support to the idea that the giant sword of Beowulf had similarly been stolen and submerged by Grendel and then guarded by his mother. This chapter therefore examines Svipdagsmál, investigates the nature of the Lævateinn, highlights similarities with other texts and weapons, and adduces further instances of Old Norse whirlpool-giantesses, before returning to Grendel’s mother.

Svipdagr’s Quest for Menglǫð

Svipdagsmál is the modern name for two Old Norse Eddic poems, Grógaldr ‘Gróa’s Incantation’ and Fjölsvinnsmál ‘The Lay of Fjölsvinnr’, which appear narratively linked. They survive only in seventeenth-century manuscripts, but it is thought probable that they were composed in the twelfth century;¹ in common with other texts examined in this book, they may contain still older mythic themes and images.

The Icelandic scholar Einar Ólafur Sveinsson took the view that ‘in general there is not a great deal of directly mythical material in the poems [Grógaldr and Fjölsvinnsmál]. There may be something at the back of them; but that is another story,’ and added that ‘a mythical element may be sought for Svipdagsmál; but if it exists, it is not obvious.’2 I believe there is such an element, that it is indeed not obvious, but that close study of Svipdagsmál and its analogues can uncover at least some of it.

In Grógaldr we meet the hero Svipdagr—he is anonymous in this poem, but his name is revealed near the end of Fjölsvinnsmál.3 He received an apparently impossible task from in lævísa kona ‘the crafty/treacherous woman’ who had embraced his father (evidently his evil stepmother): Svipdagr must visit an inaccessible woman called Menglǫð ‘Necklace-Glad’,4 who is subsequently identified as the daughter of a son of a certain Svafrþorinn ‘Sleep-Bold One(?)’; her name might suggest Freyja wearing her cherished Brísingamen, an object that seems to have been considered an aid to childbirth,5 as Menglǫð herself may have been (Fjölsvinnsmál 8, 35–40; cf. 22); it will be recalled, though, that Gerðr was also satisfied with her gold. Svipdagr is destined not only to find Menglǫð but to marry her.

First, he went to the grave of his birth mother, Gróa ‘Growing One’ (an earth-goddess?),6 to ask her for incantations to help him on his quest, for which he otherwise thought himself too young an afi ‘heir(?)’ to undertake.7 She recited nine (Grógaldr 6–14). The first was for the will to shrug off fear; the second for safety when travelling on roads; the third to send two dangerous falling rivers to Hel and make them decrease; the fourth to pacify enemies; the fifth to release a fetter from his limbs; the sixth to ensure a calm sea í lúðr ‘in a mill(-frame)’;8 the seventh to survive frost on a mountain; the eighth to avoid harm from

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4 In the previous chapter we saw how Hjálmpër was similarly cursed by his crafty stepmother, Lúða, to find the hard-to-access Hervör Hundingsdóttir.
6 Gróa is also attested as the name of a sorceress who chanted helpful spells over Þórr, and as a sword-name; see SnESkáld, I, 22, 118; PTP, 790–1.
7 The same word describes Freyr in Fór Skírnis 1, 2; Hjálmpër is similarly an arfi ‘heir’. Note also the arfi ‘heir’ of Sólarljóð 78 (discussed in Chapter 13).
8 I explain this phrase below.
a dead Christian woman by night on a misty road; the ninth in case he had to exchange words with *inn naddgöfga jötunn* ‘the nail-noble giant’, possibly the Mimi/Mími whose world-tree is mentioned shortly.⁹

These spells presumably offer clues to the perils Svipdagr faced on his journey, but which are never described, perhaps because Gróa’s spells enabled him to overcome them without incident. The frosty mountain and the Hel-bound streams may find parallel in the wet mountains that Skírnir traverses in *Fór Skírnis* and the mountain-stream that passes underground in Grendel’s frosty habitat (*Beowulf* 1359–61).

*Fjólsvinnsmál* starts abruptly. It picks up the story with Svipdagr standing *útan garða* ‘outside courts’ which lie within the walls of *þursa þjóðar sjót* ‘the home(s) of the people of giants’. This may well make Menglőð, who has authority over the place and its treasure-halls, a giantess—like Gerðr of Gymir’s garðar. Outside, Svipdagr encountered a certain *Fjólsviðr* ‘Very Wise’,¹⁰ who dwelt by *hættan loga* ‘perilous flame’ and whom he insulted by calling him a *flagð* ‘giantess’ (1). The flame, which presumably surrounds Menglőð’s hall, recalls the ‘discerning flicker-flame’ protecting Gerðr’s home in *Fór Skírnis* (see further below) and the fire on or in Grendel’s mere.

Fjólsviðr, an alleged ‘giantess’ who is probably a male *þurs* ‘giant’, rebuffed Svipdagr—compare the unwelcoming herdsman of *Fór Skírnis* and his apparent counterpart in Grendel’s masculine *hyrde* ‘herdsman’ of a mother. But Svipdagr persisted and expressed his eagerness to get inside, having perceived the courts *glóa* ‘glowing’ around *gollna sali* ‘golden halls’ (5); compare Freyr’s desire after seeing the radiant Gerðr.

Fjólsviðr asked Svipdagr his lineage. Svipdagr replied that he was *Vindkaldr* ‘Wind-Cold’, son of Várkaldr ‘Spring-Cold’, son of *Fjólkaldr* ‘Very Cold’ (6); compare Skírnir’s evasiveness about his identity.

Svipdagr then engaged the giant in deeper conversation. He learned, among other things, that the castle’s gate was made by the sons of *Sólnblindi* ‘Sun-Blind/Hidden’ (10), who are probably dwarves,¹¹ and that the formidably walled castle was guarded by two dogs, who took alternate day and night shifts (13–6); compare the guard-dogs outside Gerðr’s home and the wolves around, and minor creatures within,

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⁹ Mimi/Mími might be a variant of the better-known Mímir; see C. Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, 2 vols (Helsinki, 2009), I, 322.

¹⁰ *Fjólsviðr* and *Fjólsvinnr* are variants of the same name.

Grendel’s mere. The only way Svipdagr could enter the stronghold was to distract these dogs by feeding them titbits from a certain Viðófnir ‘Wood/Tree-Crier/Crower(?)’ (18), later identified as a cockerel.

Next Svipdagr asked about the tree whose branches stretch across all lands. Fjölsviðr identified it as Mimameiðr (or Mímameiðr) ‘Mimi’s (or Mími’s) Tree’, which neither fire nor iron can harm, and whose burnt fruit acts as an abortifacient (20–2).

Ten subsequent stanzas contain key points of interest, albeit rather difficult to access:

Svipdagr:
‘Segðu mér þat, Fjölsviðr, er ek þik fregna mun,
ok ek vilda vita:
hvát sá hani heitir, er sitr í inum háva viði —
allr hann við gull glóir.’

Fjölsviðr:
‘Viðófnir hann heitir, en hann stendr Veðr glasi,
meiðs kvistum Mima;
einum ekka þrøngr hann ørófsaman
Surtar Sinmøru.’

Svipdagr:
‘Segðu mér þat, Fjölsviðr, er ek þik fregna mun,
ok ek vilda vita:
hvárt sé vápna nǫkkut, þat er knegi Viðófnir fyrir
hniða á Heljar sjót?’

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12 For other interpretations of this name, see PTP, 948–9.
13 Emendation of veðr glasi.
14 Robinson emends sút ‘with anguish’. He states: ‘No sense can be made of surtar (or surtr), and no place can be found for Surtr in the narrative in the following stanzas’ (124). Although Surtr ‘Black One’, an apocalyptic fire-giant, plays no further part in this poem, I disagree that a reference to him makes no sense here. Since Sinmara guards a sunken treasure, it may be relevant that Surtr is associated with spøkadalir ‘sunken/ treasure(?) dales’ in the tenth-century Háleygjatal ‘Tally of the Háleygir [i.e., people of Hálógaard]’ by the Norwegian Eyvindr skáldsöpillir Finnsísson; see Whaley, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1, 197–8; R. Poole, ‘Myth and Ritual in the Háleygjatal of Eyvindr Skáldsöpillir’, in Quinn, Heslop and Wills, Learning and Understanding, 153–76 at 157–61.
15 Emendation of sinn mautu and sinn mantu.
Fjölsviðr:
‘Lævateinn\textsuperscript{16} heitir, en hann gørði Loptr rúinn,\textsuperscript{17}
fyr nágrindr neðan;
í segjárns keri liggr hann hjá Sinmǫru,
ok halda njarðlásar niú.’

Svipdagr:
‘Segðu mér þat, Fjölsviðr, er ek þik fregna mun,
ok ek vilda vita:
hvárt aptr kemr, så er eptir ferr
ok vill þann tein taka.’

Fjölsviðr:
‘Aptr mun koma, så er eptir ferr
ok vill þann tein taka,
ef þat færir sem fáir eigu
eiri Aurglasis.’

Svipdagr:
‘Segðu mér þat, Fjölsviðr, er ek þik fregna mun,
ok ek vilda vita:
hvárt sé mæta nǫkkut, þat er menn hafi,
ok verðr því in fólva gýgr fegin.’

Fjölsviðr:
‘Ljósan ljá skaltu í lúðr bera,
þann er liggr í Viðófnis volumn,
Sinmǫru at selja, áðr hon som telisk
vápn til vigs at ljá.’

Svipdagr:
‘Segðu mér þat, Fjölsviðr, er ek þik fregna mun,
ok ek vilda vita:
hvat så salr heitir, er slþunginn er
visum vafrloga?’

\textsuperscript{16} Emendation of Hevatein, for alliteration.
\textsuperscript{17} Robinson emends rifinn ‘plucked’.
Fjölsviðr:

‘Lýr hann heitir, en hann lengi mun á brodds oddi bifask;
auðranns þess munu um aldr hafa frétt eina firar.’ (23–32)

Svipdagr:
‘Tell me that, Fjölsviðr, which I will ask you, and which I would know: what the cockerel is called which sits in the high tree—he is all glowing with gold.’

Fjölsviðr:

‘Viðófnir he is called, and he stands on Veðrglasir “Weather/Wether-Gleaming”, on the branches of Mimi’s tree; with one sorrow he oppresses Surtr’s “Black One’s” Sinmara “Sinew/Perpetual/Great(?) (Night)mare”’ immeasurably.’

Svipdagr:
‘Tell me that, Fjölsviðr, which I will ask you, and which I would know: whether there is any weapon which can cause Viðófnir to sink down to Hel’s dwellings.’

Fjölsviðr:

‘Lævateinn ‘Twig of Treacheries/Evils(?)’ it is called—and Loptr “Lofty/Airy” had plucked it—beneath corpse-gates; it lies in a chest of tough-iron besides Sinmara, and nine Njörðr-locks guard it.’

Svipdagr:
‘Tell me that, Fjölsviðr, which I will ask you, and which I would know: whether he will come back, the one who goes after (it) and wants to take that twig.’


ON sin means ‘sinew(s)’, but I am inclined to explain sin- here by reference to OE sin- ‘perpetual/continual’ or ‘great’, as seen, for instance, in OE sinnihte ‘perpetual night’ (Beowulf 161) and sinfrea ‘great lord’ (Beowulf 1934). Cf. A. Zavaroni, ‘Mead and Aqua Vitae: Functions of Mímir, Oðinn, Viðófnir and Svipdagr’, ABäG 61 (2006), 65–86 at 72. On the type of monster called a mara ‘mare’ in Old Norse, see later in this chapter.

A notable detail, as Njörðr was not only a sea-god but Freyr’s father. If Svipdagr is equatable with Freyr/Skírnir, the poem may be hinting that his rightful inheritance lies within. In Chapter 13, I suggest a link with the nine daughters of Njörðr who inscribed runes on a solar antler.
Fjölsviðr:
‘He will come back, the one who goes after (it) and wants to take that twig, if he brings that which few possess to the Eir [i.e., goddess = Sinmara] of Aurglasir “Mud-Shining”.’

Svipdagr:
‘Tell me that, Fjölsviðr, which I will ask you, and which I would know: whether there is any treasure that men may obtain, with which the pale giantess [i.e., Sinmara] will be pleased.’

Fjölsviðr:
‘A radiant sickle, the one in Viðófnir’s joints/rods(?), you must carry into the “mill(-frame)”, to give it to Sinmara, before she reckons herself willing to grant you the weapon for the killing.’

Svipdagr:
‘Tell me that, Fjölsviðr, which I will ask you, and which I would know: what is the hall called, which is cast about with discerning flicker-flame?’

Fjölsviðr:
‘Lýr “Pollack/Whitefish/Pike/Fish” it is called, and long will it tremble on the point of a spike; of this treasure-house, throughout the ages, men will have only hearsay.’

The salr ‘hall’ where Menglöð dwells as ruler strongly resembles Gerðr’s salr in that both are protected visum vafrolga ‘with discerning flicker-flame’, both contain treasure and both shake (though not necessarily for the same reason). Assuming the emendation of the former hall’s name from Hyr ‘Fire’ (also a ‘sword’-term) or Hýr ‘Pleasant’ to Lýr in order to gain metrically required alliteration is correct, it may be, furthermore, that both halls were located in water, originally at least. Although previously Lýr has been interpreted as ‘Shining One’, I propose a literal interpretation of the word, arguably with reference

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21 Possibly the tip of a spear or sword.
22 It was first proposed by Sophus Bugge and is accepted by Robinson, ‘Edition’. Eysteinn Björnsson, ‘Svipdagsmál: The Lays of Svipdag’ (2001), http://web.archive.org/web/20010604093914/http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/svipdag2.html, however, prints Hýr, but thinks the word should be Hir ‘Sweet, Smiling, Mild’, which he views as a reference to Valþöll.
23 ANEW s.v. lýr 2.
to the hall’s original or alternative form, as the masculine noun lîr(r) ‘pollack’ or perhaps ‘whitefish’ or ‘pike’, a word which, at least in a skaldic context, may also bear the generalized sense ‘fish’. This word is related to Greek λευκός ‘whitefish’ and Latin lucius ‘pike(?), whence comes English ‘luce’ (a term for a pike, especially when fully grown), the etymological sense possibly being ‘bright one’. Although, at first sight, ‘Pollack/Whitefish/Pike/Fish’ might appear a most unlikely name for a hall within a walled, fire-enveloped stronghold, this impression changes if its occupant, Menglǫð, in sóljarta brúðr ‘the sun-bright bride’, is, like Gerðr, a maiden of circumscribed heavenly radiance. For I shall later adduce an Old Norse story in which a marvellous sword, probably solar, is contained within the body of a pike, as well as similar Finnish traditions that the sun was swallowed by a whitefish, pike or other fish; I shall also compare these traditions to Beowulf’s encounter with Grendel’s mother as sword-greedy ‘sea-she-wolf’. Furthermore, ON lîr(r) appears elsewhere in skaldic terms for ‘sea’, such as lîbraut ‘lîr-way’, lîrgata ‘lîr-street’ and lîs bær ‘lîr’s farm/landed estate’, several times within broader kennings for ‘gold’ imagined as the ‘fire (or embers) of the sea’, as in the case of lîsheimr ‘lîr’s home’, lîslôð ‘lîr-track’, lîteigr ‘lîr-field’ and most strikingly lîskáli ‘lîr-hall’. This last term appears in an obscure, but suggestive, anonymous stanza-fragment from the c. 1250 Third Grammatical Treatise by the Icelander Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld:

Band gaf oss með endum
Ilmr lýskála bála.

The Ilmr (‘Fragrant One’) <goddess> [WOMAN] of the bale/funeral-fires of the lîr-hall gave us [me] a band with ends [NECKLACE/TORQUE?].

We also have grounds for thinking that Menglǫð lived at sea because, as we shall discover, Svipdagr probably reached her after passing beneath a maelstrom to acquire the twig-sword Lævateinn. In view of this

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24 Clunies Ross, Poetry on Christian Subjects, 187.
25 ANEW s.v. lîr 1 and lîrr, lîr; IO s.v. lîr, lîrr 1.
26 Not, however, one called a lîr(r).
27 See Chapter 15.
28 See Meissner, Kenningar, 96–7; LP and CV s.v. lîr.
29 PTP, 554.
sword’s apparent importance to Svipdagr’s quest, and the trembling of Menglöð’s hall on the point of a weapon, it also catches the eye that in a list of poetic names for fish, lýr comes immediately after sverðfiskr ‘sword-fish’ (Xiphias gladius).³⁰

Fjölsviðr went on to list the names of the dwarves who built the interior of the castle, which was completed by Dellingr ‘Descendant of Brightness’ (34). Dellingr is identified in another Eddic poem, Vafþrúðnismál ‘The Sayings of Vafþrúðnir’ (25), as the father of Dagr ‘Day’.

In response to further enquiries from Svipdagr, who sees the þjóðmæra ‘most glorious’ woman (Menglǫð) standing motionless on a cliff or mountain (35), Fjölsviðr goes on to identify the site as Lyfjaberg ‘Mountain of Remedies’, which heals all women who scale it of every affliction, even barrenness (36). He also mentions the nine maidens (personifications of waves?) who sit at Menglöð’s feet, the last of whom is Aurboða (38)—elsewhere the name of Gerðr’s mother.

Svipdagr, it appears, is in an impossible situation. To enter the castle, he must distract the guard-dogs with titbits from the body of Viðófnir, the cockerel which can be killed only with a special weapon, Lævateinn.³¹ But he can access Lævateinn only by acquiring a shining sickle from the body of Viðófnir! Nevertheless, after hearing that Menglöð was destined for him alone (42), Svipdagr revealed his true name and commanded that the gates to the stronghold be opened (43). Fjölsviðr then went to announce to Menglöð the arrival of the gest ‘guest’ (compare Ægir and Beowulf as guests), and to see whether she would welcome her visitor, given that the dogs welcomed him, the house had unlocked itself and he believed Svipdagr to be who he said he was (44). Menglöð threatened to have Fjölsviðr hanged if he was lying, but after the young man revealed to her his true identity as Svipdagr son of Sólbjártr ‘Sun-Bright’ and reported that he had reached her over vindkalda vegu ‘wind-cold ways’ (47), she ecstatically embraced him as the man she had waited for døgr ok daga ‘day after day’ (49); the throes of longing that each of them had endured were over (50).

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³⁰ SnESkáld, I, 126; PTP, 855–6.
³¹ This word is found only here, though Richard North argues for a reference to ‘a lævateinn’ in a corrupt passage of Hauslǫng 11; North, Hauslǫng, 48.
Loki’s Taking of the Twig

From the story’s unexpectedly swift resolution, the relevance of the quoted stanzas concerning Lævateinn is not immediately clear. It is not made clear that Svipdagr acquired this weapon, despite having learnt how to do so. It would, however, be extraordinary if the means of acquiring Lævateinn, having been described in such detail, were irrelevant to the story’s conclusion. Also, we may presumably infer from the dogs’ welcoming of Svipdagr, that he had acquired the necessary food for them, which he could only have done by using Lævateinn. Possibly, he had also used Lævateinn or the golden sickle to kill Sinmara.32

Although no trip by the hero to acquire a remarkable twig or twig-sword is described in either Svipdagsmál or the later Danish ballad of Ungen Svendal (or Ungen Sveidal) ‘Young Svendal’, which gives a variant version of events,33 the ballad does attribute its hero a remarkable fiery sword. This he received from his dead mother, along with, among other things, a horse and an exceptionally fast ship. She declares:

‘Ieg skall giffue deg suerditt,
er harditt y drage-blod:
y-huor du rider igieemill [v.l. igiennom] mørkenn skuoff,
daa brinder hun som enn booell.’34

‘I shall give you the sword which is hardened in dragon-blood: wherever you ride through a dark wood, then it burns like a fire.’

From this stanza it seems reasonable to infer that Svendal took his sword to a dark wood, where it burst into flame. As will become clear, this sword’s fiery radiance in association with a wood is suggestive of Lævateinn. But in combination with the horse and ship, it calls to mind more especially

32 Puhvel, Beowulf, 31–2 observes that in Celtic tradition a sword of light guarded by a supernatural hag is often ‘the object of a quest by a hero who on getting it through some ruse into his hand slays the owner with it’.
33 On the relationship of Svipdagsmál to ballad-tradition, see J. Harris, ‘Edda and Ballad: Svipdagsmál and the Uses of Poetic Afterlife’, in Tangherlini, Nordic Mythologies, 35–49. The name Svendal and its variants are thought to derive ultimately from Svipdagr.
34 S. Grundtvig, Danmarks gamle folkeviser, 10 vols (Copenhagen, 1853–1976), II, 240, stanza 15.
the sword (comparable to Hrunting) and horse which Skírnir received from Freyr, who also owned a marvellous ship. The association of Svendal’s sword with a wood raises the likelihood that it, like Lævateinn and gambanteinn, was a twig-sword. This strengthens the grounds for also comparing it to Hrunting, the implicitly radiant weapon whose nature as a twig-sword I reveal in Chapter 16. Other versions of the ballad describe Svendal’s sword as det goede suerd ‘the good sword’ and the sverd saa got ‘sword so good’, and name it Adelring ‘Noble Ring’. This name indicates that it had a ring attached to its hilt or was otherwise marked with a ring, like Hrunting and the god ‘good’ giant sword. Additionally, one version of the ballad describes the hero subsequently riding offuer det brede haff / och gienem de grene skoffue …. offuer det vilde haff / och gienem de marche skouffue ‘over the broad sea and through the green wood … over the wild sea and through the dark wood’. Perhaps we may compare Skírnir’s journey to a wood to get the gambanteinn.

Whether or not Svipdagr did acquire Lævateinn, its nature, plucking and location are important to this study. Previously, this weapon has been assumed to be a sword. It probably is, but given the preceding reference to the meiðs kvistum Mima ‘branches of Mimi’s tree’ (the tree evidently being a world-tree), a fundamental basis as a teinn ‘twig’ seems likely, as it does for the gambanteinn. Here the meaning of the passage Lævateinn hettir, en hann gørði Loptr rúinn, fyr nágrindr neðan is crucial. Loptr is an alias of Loki meaning ‘Lofty’, ‘Airy’ (from ON loft ‘air’, ‘sky’). Its use here suggests an airy setting, in keeping with the taking of a twig from a branch of the towering world-tree. Although it possibly was fyr nágrindr neðan ‘below corpse-gates’ — that is, ‘in

35 Freyr’s ship was Skíðblaðnir; SnEGylf, 36. Óðinn, who may also be connected with Svipdagr, owned the same ship, or at least a ship with the same name.
36 Grundtvig, Danmarks gamle folkeviser, 245–6.
37 Grundtvig, Danmarks gamle folkeviser, 245.
38 Note also the description of Svipdagr’s partial namesake, the mythical Swedish King Dagr ‘Day’ (a likely euhemerization of Freyr), as valteins ... sprakfrumudr ‘the wise-advancer of the slaughter-twig [SWORD]’ in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, I, 35–6 (see further Chapter 14). As we have seen, Freyr’s sword, which required a wise owner, appears comparable to Hrunting, which I later identify as another twig-sword.
39 Loki flies, using Freyja’s feather-skin, in Prymskviða. Another myth records that he turned himself into a fly to disrupt a dwarf’s forging of treasures for the gods; SnESkáld, I, 41–2.
40 The same phrase appears in the context of events á viðar rōtum ‘at the roots of the (world-)tree’ in Før Skírnis 35.
Hel’, the subterranean land of the dead—that Loki plucked the twig, it seems questionable whether a character here explicitly identified as ‘Airy’ would have plucked it underground. Rather, I interpret the words Lævateinn heitir and fyr nágrindr nedan together as ‘It is called Lævateinn below corpse-gates’, with en hann gorði Loptr rúinn being a parenthesis perhaps illuminating the weapon’s name on the basis of Loki’s widespread association with læ ‘treachery’, ‘harm’.

Alternatively, it might be that the phrase gorði rúinn succinctly expresses both the plucking of a twig from a mid-air branch and its subsequent removal to a place below corpse-gates.

If Loki did pluck a twig from a mid-air branch of Mimi’s tree, it is likely to have been a radiant twig, as the name Veðrglasir ‘We(a)ther-Gleaming’ apparently describes either this tree or one of its branches. And if Sinmara’s home contained a radiant twig, this could explain why that place was called Aurglasir ‘Mud-Shining’.

Other evidence also points to Lævateinn being a twig of heavenly light, most likely fiery—probably a symbol of a sunbeam. Loki was closely associated with fire. In Gylfaginning he competes commendably against Logi ‘Flame’, a personification of fire. At Ragnarök he is allied with the fire-giant Surtr. Additionally, Loki’s taking of a twig-weapon from Mimi’s tree may parallel Prometheus’ theft of heavenly fire from

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41 Cf. e.g., inn lævisi Loki ‘the treachery-wise Loki’ in Lokasenna 54. ‘Twig of Treacheries/Harms/Evil Crafts’ seems the most likely interpretation of Lævateinn (cf. Falk, Altnordische Waffenkunde, 55). It may identify Lævateinn as the subject of repeated treachery: or as a weapon which betrays its possessor(s) (as the giant sword killed Grendel and his mother); or as one which punishes treacheries; or as one which causes harm; or as one which is the subject of harm (or some or all of these possibilities). Additionally, it calls to mind the sviga lævi ‘fraud/treason/bane of switches’ wielded by Surtr in Völuspá (see Chapter 9), Surtr being the apocalyptic fire-giant identified as Sinmara’s possessor in Fjölsvinnsnátl 24. It may be worth adding that, in view of Lævateinn’s likely presence beneath the sea, a pun on ON læ, lá ‘sea, surf’ may be entertained. If wordplay is present, note also the lé ‘sickle’ required by Sinmara if she was to relinquish Lævateinn. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Svipdag’s Long Journey’, 301 offers yet another interpretation of the weapon’s name, but without comment: ‘wand of non-deceit’.

42 The interpretation ‘Wether-Gleaming’ is defensible on the basis that the world-tree is elsewhere identified with Heimdalr ‘World-Tree’, the white ram-god. His wool may have been equated with twigs, rather as the hair of the giant Ymir became the world’s trees; cf. Chapter 10 n. 146. This could explain the use of rúinn, past participle of rýja ‘to pluck wool from sheep’, to describe Loki’s taking of the twig.

43 SnEgylf, 40, 43.
Zeus by concealing it in a stalk of giant fennel, especially as scholars have drawn other parallels between Loki and the Greek Titan.\textsuperscript{44}

\textit{Svipdagsmál} does not reveal why Loki took Lævateinn from the world-tree. But that its taking was a crime seems highly likely, not just because of the parallel with Prometheus’ theft. Loki was notorious for larceny. Snorri describes him as \textit{þjófr jǫtna, hafrs ok Brisingamens ok lǫunnar epla} ‘thief of [i.e., for] giants, of a goat and of Brisingamen and of Iðunn’s apples’.\textsuperscript{45} It was also Loki who caused Þórr to set out to meet the giant Geirrøðr without his weaponry,\textsuperscript{46} though it is unclear whether on that occasion he stole Þórr’s equipment or simply duped him into travelling unarmed. As ‘thief of giants’, Loki is probably complicit in the theft of Þórr’s hammer, as \textit{Þrymskviða} gives the impression that he knew immediately that Mjǫllnir was in Þrymr’s possession. In that case, the hammer may have been stolen not just for the pleasure of mischief, but also for the protection of Þrymr and his sister (and Loki himself), rather as Loki may similarly have taken Lævateinn partly to protect Sinmara and Surtr (and himself), and as Grendel, I suspect, stole the giant sword partly to protect himself and his mother.

Most importantly, Loki is elsewhere notorious for having taken a \textit{teinn} which, like Lævateinn, was the only weapon that could pierce an otherwise invulnerable target. That \textit{teinn} was, of course, the \textit{mistilteinn} ‘mistletoe’ which slew Baldr, which Loki sleit upp ‘tore up’ from its location west of Valhöll, according to \textit{Gylfaginning}.\textsuperscript{47} It seems likely that Lævateinn and the \textit{mistilteinn} are variants of each other, or at least

\textsuperscript{44} Both are tricksters and culture heroes of giantish stock, and each is punished by the gods by being bound to a rock, on which each writhes and is tormented by savage creatures; see F. S. Cawley, ‘The Figure of Loki in Germanic Mythology’, \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 32 (1939), 309–26, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0017816000022446; W. Hansen, ‘Prometheus and Loki: The Myth of the Fettered God and his Kin’, \textit{C&M} 58 (2007), 65–118. Generally, on the myth of the theft of fire, which is often ‘related to that of the theft of light or of the sun’, see Witzel, \textit{Origins}, 154, 157–8 (quotation on p. 154).

\textsuperscript{45} SnESkáld, I, 20.

\textsuperscript{46} SnESkáld, I, 24.

\textsuperscript{47} SnEGylf, 45. ‘Tore up’ is a rather odd expression to use of mistletoe, which does not root itself in the ground, though it does in the branches of trees. Snorri may well have been unfamiliar with mistletoe, which does not grow in Iceland. For some thoughts on this vexed issue, see M. Kaplan, ‘Once More on the Mistletoe’, in M. Kaplan and T. R. Tangherlini (ed.), \textit{News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture in Honor of John F. Lindow} (Berkeley, 2012), 36–60 at 56.
closely akin, as others have suspected. They also both seem likely variants of Skírnir’s gambanteinn, and therefore, at a greater remove, of Beowulf’s giant sword.

More About Lævateinn and Mistilteinn

Two further pieces of evidence strengthen the likelihood that Lævateinn is closely related to the mistilteinn with which Loki instigated Baldr’s death, and therewith probably also akin to Skírnir’s gambanteinn and Beowulf’s giant sword.

First is the Dutch word for ‘mistletoe’, maretak. Its literal meaning is ‘mare’s twig/branch’, the ‘mare’ being a cognate of ON mara and Old English mære and mær, which survives in modern English ‘nightmare’. The ‘mare’ was a kind of trampling, smothering creature of female gender. We encountered it earlier as the second element in Sinmara, the name of the giantess who guards Lævateinn.

Second is the radiant sickle or scythe (lé, accusative singular ljá) which Svipdagr had to acquire and present to Sinmara in order to receive Lævateinn. This implement was presumably golden, like the cockerel Viðófnir in which it resided—a creature that, for one scholar, ‘symbolizes the solar light’. To me, it calls to mind the golden sickle used by Gallic druids to harvest mistletoe in a rite invoking the moon, according to Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* (16.115). Pliny records that these druids harvested mistletoe from Valonia oaks:

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49 In Chapter 16 I suggest that the giant sword might also be connected with mistletoe through its pairing with Hrunting.
50 Cf. ON marhrísla ‘mare-twig’, a term included in a list of poetic terms for trees. It has been explained as referring to ‘birch-twigs tangled from being ridden by a mara’; *PTP*, 883–4.
52 Zavaroni, ‘Mead’, 72. The same scholar adds: ‘The name Viðófnir (við- ‘wide’ + ófn < *vafa* ‘oscillate’) is interpretable as ‘Wide Oscillation’ (a possible allusion to the course of the sun from dawn to sunset, from the early morning crowing to the twilight crowing of the cock).’ For an interpretation of inscribed sickles of the European Bronze Age as lunar symbols, see Meller, *Der geschmiedete Himmel*, 118–23.
Mistletoe is, however, rather seldom found on Valonia oak, and when it is discovered it is gathered with great ceremony, and particularly on the sixth day of the moon (which for these tribes constitutes the beginning of the months and the years), and after every thirty years of a new generation, because it is then rising in strength and not one half of its full size. Hailing the moon in a native word that means ‘healing all things,’ they prepare a ritual sacrifice and banquet beneath a tree and bring up two white bulls, whose horns are bound for the first time on this occasion. A priest arrayed in white vestments climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts down the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloak.

Despite the very large chronological and cultural gap, this resemblance may be more than coincidental, especially as the *Naturalis Historia* was known in early medieval Europe. From whatever written or oral source, *Svipdagsmal* may echo the druidic harvesting of mistletoe (represented by Lævateinn) with a golden sickle under a waxing, sickle-like crescent moon, albeit somewhat distortedly, given that Loki had already plucked the twig-weapon from the tree and deposited it in the underworld.

This explanation of *Svipdagsmal*’s sickle seems preferable to that offered by Peter Robinson. He identifies the lé as the ‘scythe (or sickle) shaped tail feather of the cock, endowed with the magic power of opening locks’, and compares a passage from a dialogue called ‘The Dream, or the Cock’ by Lucian of Samosata, a second-century Syrian. In this text, a cockerel states that any man who, with his permission, plucks his longest tail feather, may use it to open every door. However,

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54 Perhaps compare, very broadly, Lyfjaberg, the mountain on which Menglöð stood, which was a panacea for women in *Svipdagsmal*.
55 Translation from Rackham, *Pliny: Natural History*, IV, 549, 551. Noteworthy is the involvement of horned beasts, as the crescent moon is also ‘horned’; we shall encounter more horned lunar creatures later in this study.
as Robinson concedes, ‘worlds lie between the sophisticated *jeux*’ of Lucian and *Svipdagsmál*.\(^57\) Secondly, Lucian’s feather, unlike that of *Svipdagsmál* and implicitly the druids’ golden sickle, does not gleam. Also, if, as argued below, *i lúðr* in *Svipdagsmál* refers not to *Svipdagr*’s placing of the sickle ‘in the case’ (the chest containing Lævateinn?), as Robinson thinks, but to his descent ‘into the maelstrom’, this eliminates the need to interpret the sickle as a key. Perhaps the marvellous sickle was instead required because it was the only blade capable of severing the divine locks on the chest securing Lævateinn. Or maybe it was simply demanded by the likely moon-giantess Simara as a gleaming replacement, if she were to relinquish Lævateinn. Assuming *Svipdagr* did obtain the sickle, however, he probably used it, or Lævateinn, to kill Simara.\(^58\)

**Saxo’s Hotherus, Balderus and the Sword of Mimingus**

Another parallel to the concealed Lævateinn and the *mistilteinn* that slew Baldr—one that may also suggest a solar connection—is the sword with which Hotherus (ON *Hǫðr*) slew Balderus (*Baldr*), his rival for the hand of Nanna, the beautiful daughter of a certain Gevar(us),\(^59\) according to Saxo’s thirteenth-century *Gesta Danorum* (3.2.5–6):

> Nam ne ferro quidem sacram corporis eius firmitatem cedere perhibebat. Adiecit tamen scire se gladium artissimis obseratum claustris, quo fatum ei infligi possit. Hunc a Mimingo siluarum Satyro possideri. Eidem quoque armillam esse mira quadam arcanaque uirtute possessoris opes augere solitam. Horum praeterea locorum aditum inuium <ac> impedimentis


\(^58\) In world mythology, sickles and sickle-like weapons, including swords, are often used by gods and great men to slay monsters and other foes. They include the weapon of the Mesopotamian sun-god Shamash; the weapon with which the Biblical Samson (as noted earlier, probably from Hebrew *shemesh* ‘sun’) killed a thousand Philistines; the weapon with which Cain slew Abel; the weapon with which Zeus overcame Typhon; and the weapon with which Perseus slew Medusa; see A. A. Barb, ‘Cain’s Murder-Weapon and Samson’s Jawbone of an Ass’, *JWCI* 35 (1972), 386–9, https://doi.org/10.2307/750938; I. Signorini, ‘Monsters, the Gaze, Death, and the Hero. An Outsider’s Rambling Thoughts on *Beowulf*, *Grettis Saga* and the Myth of Medusa’, in T. Pàroli (ed.), *La funzione dell’eroe germanico: storicità, metafora, paradigma: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio Roma, 6–8 maggio 1993* (Rome, 1995), 27–39 at 39.

\(^59\) Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology*, I, 202 identifies him as a moon-god.
obfusum haud facile mortalibus patere posse. Maiorem siquidem itineris partem inusitati frigoris ui perenniter obsideri. Iubet itaque, ceruis iugalibus currum instruat, cuui celeritate eximio gelu rigentia iuga transcendent. Quo cum peruenir, tabernaculum suum ita a sole auersum constituit, ut umbram specus, cui Mimingus asseuisset, excipiat, nec ipsum mutua tamen obumbratione contingat, ne satyrum insolitae obscuritatis iactus exitu deturbaret. Ita armillam enseque in expedito fore, quorum alterum opum, alterum belli fortuna comitatur; in utroque ingens possessori premium esse.

Hactenus Geuarus. Nec inerer Hotherus, que ab ipso didicerat, executus, tabernaculo ad predictum modum locato nocto curas, interdiu uenationes agebat. Vtramque temporis uicem peruigil exsomnisque ducebat, ita discrimina lucis noctisque partitus, ut hanc rerum meditacioni trubuerit, illam conunctandis corporis alimentis impenderet. Cumque forte pernox attonita curis mente languesceret, obumbrantem tabernaculo suo satyrum hasta petiuit obrutumque ictu nec satis fuge potentem uinculis intercept. Vltima deinde per summam uerborum atrocitatem minatus ensem armillamque deposcit. Nec segniter satyrus salutis redemptionem, que ab ipso petebatur, exhibuit. Adeo cunctis rebus prior est uita, cum nihil apud mortales spiritu charius exsistere soleat. Høtherus opum adeptione letatus patriam repetit, paucis sed insignibus spoliis foelix.

His [Balderus’] body, Gevar asserted, possessed a holy strength impermeable even to steel. Yet, he added, there existed, to his knowledge, shut away behind the tightest barriers, a sword which could deal him his fate. It belonged to Miming, a wood-troll. This creature also possessed a bracelet with the miraculous hidden power of increasing its owner’s wealth. The approach to those regions was pathless, beset with obstacles, and hard of access to any human being. The greater length of the route, in fact, was perpetually invested by devastating cold. He therefore gave Høther instructions to yoke a team of reindeer to his sledge so that he could cross over the hard-frozen mountain ridges at tremendous speed. When he reached his destination he must erect his tent away from the sun so that it caught the shade of the cave where Miming lived; but the tent’s shadow should not touch the cave in return, otherwise the unusual patch of darkness it cast might drive the troll back from the entrance. In this way the bracelet and sword would be within his grasp, the one accompanied by material prosperity, the other by success in fighting; both spelt a great boon to their possessor.
That was Gevar’s advice. Høther followed his prescriptions to the letter and, when he had pitched his tent as dictated, he devoted the nights to his anxieties, the days to hunting. He passed the revolutions of the sun watchful and unsleeping, and only marked the divisions between light and darkness by spending the one in meditation and the other in gathering bodily sustenance. During one night’s vigil, as he was drooping, his mind numbed by worries, the shadow of the troll chanced to fall across his tent; Høther went for him with his spear, felled him with a lunge and bound him while he was still powerless to get away. Then, threatening the worst with utmost savagery, he demanded the sword and the bracelet. The troll was not slow to buy his safety with the required ransom. Life is so much more valuable than any kind of property, for nothing is dearer than breath to mortal creatures. The happy Høther returned to his own country in possession of the treasures, rejoicing in his small but invaluable spoils.\footnote{Text and translation from GD, I, 146–9.}


The name of the satyr (or ‘wood-troll’ as translated above), Mimingus (Mimingr), resembles Mimi/Mími, the owner of the world-tree from which Loki probably stole Lævateinn in Svipdagsmál (conceivably Lævateinn, or an equivalent weapon, was also known as Mimingr/Mímingr ‘Scion of Mimi/Mími’). This resemblance, together with Mimingus’ sylvan nature, suggests that Mimingus’ sword probably came originally from a tree—that it was another twig-sword. Both weapons also have in common their concealment in almost inaccessible places, reached only by journeying over frozen mountains. However, the actual places of concealment differ.

Elsewhere in Germanic literature the similar name Mim(m)ing and variants thereof denote remarkable swords. We have already encountered one instance in Hjálpás saga, where Mímungr is an alternative name for Snarvendill, the candle-sword which appears analogous to the giant sword.\footnote{On this sword-name in Germanic literature, see G. T. Gillespie, A Catalogue of Persons Named in German Heroic Literature (700–1600) Including Named Animals and Objects and Ethnic Names (Oxford, 1973), 94–5. Gillespie, however, states that ‘The short vowel of this sword-name makes any association with the smith Mîme [= ON Mímir] unlikely, especially as its fashioning is always attributed to Wieland [= OE Weland].’} Another sword called Mimming appears centuries earlier in the
fragmentary Old English poem *Waldere*. There it is described as *Weland geworc* ‘Weland-work’, and as a hard weapon to wield, but also as one that *ne geswicēd* ‘does not fail’ the man who can hold it, as it is the *maðma cyst* ‘choicest of treasures’ (*Fragment* I, 2–4, 24); similarly the giant sword could be wielded only by Beowulf, whom, unlike other swords, it did not fail, it being the *wapna cyst* ‘choicest of weapons’ (1559). In addition, the Mimming of *Waldere* was probably kept on *stanfate stille gehided* ‘hidden stilly in a stone vat/vessel/casket/scabbard(?)’ (*Fragment* II, 3); if its stony container were a casket, rather than (perhaps) a scabbard adorned by gemstones, it would appear functionally comparable to the locked iron chest in which *Sinnmara* kept Lævateinn. We might also infer from *stille* ‘stilly’ that, unless Mimming were kept in such a container, it would move or blaze violently of its own accord, like Freyr’s giant-killing sword. In the Middle English romance *Horn Childe*, a woman gives the eponymous hero a sword called *Bitter-fer* ‘Bitter Iron’, which hung by a ring and *þe make of miming* ‘the equal/match of Miming’, the king of all swords, and which had been made by Weland; it will be recalled that the giant sword also had a ring and hung from a wall. Another sword of this name appears in the mid-thirteenth-century Norwegian *Þiðreks saga af Bern* ‘Saga of Þiðrekr of Bern’; there the name denotes a sword made by Velent (ON *Vǫlundr*, OE *Weland*), a student latterly of two dwarf-smiths, and earlier of a smith called *Mímir*. It appears not unlikely, therefore, that Saxo’s Mimingus and his sword shared the same name or a very similar one.

Another distinct possibility is that Mimingus’ sword was alternatively, or additionally, called *Mistilteinn*, or at least identified with mistletoe. One reason for thinking this is the appearance of a sword of this name in an Old Norse saga to be examined later. Another, of course, is that, according to *Gylfaginning*, Baldr was slain by mistletoe, albeit in the form of a projectile, not a sword. This possibility is strengthened by

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63 Perhaps better emended to *Welandes geworc* ‘Weland’s work’.
64 Cf. MIFL, motif A721 ‘Sun kept in box’.
67 Recall that Snarvendill is also called *Mímungr*.
68 See Chapter 15.
the pairing of Mimingus’ sword with a bracelet or armring of riches, since a similar combination is possessed by Skírnir in For Skírnis. Before overcoming Gerðr with the gambanteinn, Skírnir threatened her with a sword and offered her a magical ring that had been burnt on Baldr’s pyre; this ring is identifiable as Draupnir, which was an armring of riches in the sense that eight other rings dripped from it every ninth night.

A reason to identify Mimingus’ sword with sunlight is not immediately apparent from the quoted passage, although the passage does mention the sun. The curious preparations Hotherus has to make in order to capture the satyr, which involve him erecting his tent away from the sun and apparently watching by night, may indicate that the cave-dwelling Mimingus is a creature of nocturnal (lunar?) shadow, in which he keeps the sword. However, the possibility of a solar identity for this weapon, and a lunar identity for Mimingus, will strengthen later when we examine an episode from the Old Norse Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra ‘Saga of King Heiðrekr the Wise’ (Heiðreks saga). In it a dwarf (compare Mimingus), who had probably stolen and hidden part of the sun in the darkness of his stony home, is similarly restrained outside his abode after sunset by a huntsman and made to hand over a solar sword.69

Lævateinn in the Lúðr

The likelihood of kinship between Svipdagsmál’s Lævateinn and the giant sword of Beowulf strengthens considerably with the recognition that, after plucking the former twig-weapon, Loki took it to a place of concealment below water next to Sinmara. We may compare the presence of the (probably stolen) giant sword in the mere near to Grendel’s mother.

A submarine location for the concealed Lævateinn is not obvious, but may be deduced with some confidence from its placement beside Sinmara in an iron chest secured by njarðlásar niu ‘nine Njörðr-locks’. Njörðr (Njórðr) was Freyr’s maritime father and his nine locks, I suspect, relate to his nine daughters, who may well, like those of Ægir, be personified waves.70 Sinmara, who seems to function as Lævateinn’s

69 See Chapter 13.
70 See Chapter 13.
guardian in the underworld, and whose paleness may suggest both a
deathly pallor and moonlight,\footnote{Cf. Hebrew lĕbānā ‘white lady’, a term for the moon; van der Toorn, Becking and van der Horst, Dictionary, 586.} lived in or below a lúðr (Fjólsvinnsmál 30). This word literally means the ‘wooden frame of a hand-mill’, or part thereof, but may also be used *pars pro toto* in the sense ‘mill’.\footnote{See *PTP*, 378; C. Tolley, ‘The Mill in Norse and Finnish Mythology’, *SBVS* 24 (1994–7), 63–82 at 70; C. Tolley (ed.), *Grottasøngr: The Song of Grotti* (London, 2008), illustration facing p. 1, 2. With regards to milling it may be noted that *Vafthrúðnismál* 23 describes how, each day, the siblings Máni ‘Moon’ and Sól ‘Sun’ have to turn the sky, arguably imagined as the upper of two millstones turned with the aid of a male figure called Mundilfræ ‘Mill-Handle-Mover(?)’; see also *SnEgylf*, 13; *SnESkáld*, I, 39. For another milling link, see E. G. Suhr, ‘The Maerchen and the Eclipse’, *Folklore* 83 (1972), 272–86 at 274.} Here it very probably has a metaphorical aquatic sense which was established earlier, in Grógaldr, in Gróa’s description of her sixth incantation to Svipdagr:

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\begin{align*}
\text{‘Pann gel ek þér inn sétt, } & \text{ ef þú á sjó kömr} \\
& \text{meira en menn viti:} \\
& \text{logn ok logr } \text{gangi þér i lúðr saman} \\
& \text{ok ljáí þér æ friðdrjúgrar farar.} \quad \text{\(73\)} \quad \text{\((11)\)}
\end{align*}
\]

‘This I chant for you as the sixth (incantation), if you come upon a sea greater than men know: may calm and ocean/water go together for you in the lúðr and always grant you a peaceful journey.’

The editor of the most detailed edition of *Svipdagsmál* translates this instance of lúðr as ‘the mill’ and a second instance, in Fjólsvinnsmál 30 (quoted earlier), as ‘the case’.\footnote{Adapted from Robinson, ‘Edition’, 64–5.} This is inconsistent, and the translation of the latter instance as ‘the case’ seems unhelpful as it invites confusion with the chest containing Lævateinn (called a ker, not a lúðr, in Fjólsvinnsmál 26). Both instances of lúðr seem rather to be metaphors for the same thing: a (or the) ‘maelstrom’ (etymologically a ‘milling/grinding stream’), the basis of the analogy being that a giant whirlpool revolves and destroys whatever enters its ‘eye’, like a mill. This metaphorical sense of lúðr is attested in a skaldic stanza, probably of the tenth or eleventh century, by a skaldic poet called Snæbjórnr. It describes a whirlpool as the *eylúðr* ‘island-mill-frame’
of Gotti, a mythological hand-mill turned by níu bruíðir ‘nine brides’ (waves, daughters of Ægir).\(^{75}\) A story in Gylfaginning, analogous to, or partly influenced by, the Biblical myth of the Flood and Noah’s Ark also appears relevant. Snorri records that after the killing of Ymir, so much blood flowed from the primordial giant’s wounds that the whole race of frost-giants was drowned, except for one, Bergelmir, who för upp á lúðr sinn ok kona hans ok helzk þar ‘went up on his lúðr [i.e., coffin/ark?] with his wife and was kept safe there’.\(^{76}\) Although Snorri’s interpretation of lúðr differs, here too we have a marine lúðr in turbulent waters. Snorri’s main source for this myth was Vafþrúðnismál (29, 35), which he seems to have either misinterpreted or reinterpreted; that poem records how the giant Bergelmir ‘Bundle of Reaped Barley Grain’, son of Brúðgelmir ‘Bundle of Powerfully Thriving Reaped Grain’, son of Aurgelmir ‘Bundle of Ears (of Corn)’ was à lúðr um lagiðr ‘laid in/on a mill(frame)’\(^{77}\). There may, however, also be an aquatic aspect to Vafþrúðnismál’s version of events, as the element gelmir seen in these giant-names elsewhere designates rivers.\(^{78}\)

Another possible reason to associate Lævateinn, as a twig-sword, with a lúðr in the sense ‘mill’—though this time not an aquatic one—is the naming of certain components of the historical Norse handmill. As well as an upper part called the skapttré ‘shaft-tree’ in Iceland, the handmill had a piece of wood called the ‘lightening tree’ in Shetland, the lettetre in Norway and possibly the léttitré in Old Norse.\(^{79}\) Furthermore, Shetlandic water-mills had a small wooden cross-bar called a swerd ‘sword’, which passed through the head of the lightening tree on the mill floor.\(^{80}\) Additionally, in English dialect, a lowder (< ON lúðr), as well as denoting ‘the wooden bench upon which a hand-mill rests; the foundation supporting the nether millstone’,\(^{81}\) can mean ‘a wooden lever or hand-spoke used for lifting the millstones; any long, stout,

\(^{75}\) PTP, 377–8; SnESkáld, I, 38; Tolley, ‘The Mill’, 69–71; Tolley, Grottasongr, 25–6. Eglúðr is also an alias of Óðinn, though perhaps with an entirely different meaning; PTP, 748–9.

\(^{76}\) SnEGylf, 11.


\(^{78}\) As noted in Tolley, ‘Beowulf’s Scyld Seafing Episode’, 30–1.

\(^{79}\) Tolley, Grottasongr, illustration facing p. 1.

\(^{80}\) G. Goudie, The Celtic and Scandinavian Antiquities of Shetland (Edinburgh, 1904), 262.

\(^{81}\) EDD s.v. ‘lowder’ sb.\(^1\)
rough stick’ (sometimes used as a makeshift weapon), in which sense the compound *louther-tree* is also attested. Might there be a connection with the twig-sword that Loki took from Mimi’s tree down into the *lúðr*?83

If both instances of *lúðr* in *Svipdagsmál* denote the same thing, a ‘milling’ whirlpool, this clarifies the narrative. Svipdagr has to carry the sickle into the maelstrom in order to give it to Sinmara, a task he can accomplish by using Gróa’s maelstrom-calmimg incantation.

The Maelstrom-Giantess in Sagas of Hjálmpér, Grettir and Samson

We met another possible whirlpool-giantess earlier, in *Hjálmpés saga*. I interpreted the name of the hero’s wicked stepmother, *Lúða*, as ‘She of the Mill-(Frame)/Whirlpool (*lúðr*)’, although her link with a maelstrom is obscure in the saga. It will, however, be recalled that it was from Lúða that Vargeisa received *Snarvendill*, a blade probably analogous to Lævateinn and the giant sword, two weapons recovered from giantesses beneath turbulent waters. It seems likely, therefore, that at an earlier stage Snarvendill also came from a monstrous female who lived in a whirlpool.

Two other Old Norse saga-episodes testify more clearly to the presence of a troll-woman or ‘goddess’ beneath turbulent, ‘milling’ water. That both episodes are accepted analogues to the mere-episode of *Beowulf* strengthens the case which I shall shortly make for identifying Grendel’s mother as a maelstrom-giantess, and therefore for comparing the giant sword to Lævateinn.

Toward the end of the Sandhaugur-episode of *Grettis saga* (chapter 66), Grettir inscribes on a rune-stick two skaldic stanzas describing his recent experiences. The first reads:

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82 *EDD* s.v. ‘lowder’ sb.² and v.¹

83 Note also, for a connection between swords and mills, a reference to the West Saxons’ victory *mecum mylenscearpum* ‘with mill-sharpened swords’ in the Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* (24); see S. Walton, ‘Words of Technological Virtue: “The Battle of Brunanburh” and Anglo-Saxon Sword Manufacture’, *Technology and Culture* 36 (1995), 987–99. A sword such as Lævateinn whose home was a ‘mill’ might therefore have been supposed to be extraordinarily sharp.
I went into a dark gulf, the vaulted flight of stones gaped with spray-cold mouth at the sword-endower of the storm of the ship-roller [ROUGH SEA > WARRIOR, i.e., Grettir]; the flight-stream struck hard from the front against my breast in the hall of Nauma <Iðunn?> [CAVE]; there rather came on to the poet’s shoulders the hard hate of Bragi’s wife [IDUNN].

Here, in addition to using images of stormy water and a whirlpool, Grettir apparently likens the horrifyingly animate environment of a cave in which giants lived to the hall of the goddess Iðunn, wife of Bragi, god of poetry. This equation conceals a pun on both ON iða ‘eddý’ and unnr ‘wave’, with reference to the violent waters that assail Grettir. Significantly too, the name Nauma, a word of uncertain etymology which elsewhere denotes a river and an island, may well identify Iðunn as a wolfish troll-woman, who is presumably equatable with the ogress whom Grettir had encountered shortly earlier and whom he said had dived into the gulf. In stanza 8 of some manuscripts of the Eddic poem Hrafnagaldur Óðins, Nauma seems to be an alias of Iðunn, who, having sunk down from the world-tree Yggdrasill, found herself in nocturnal darkness beneath the tree, where she donned a wolfskin, altered her disposition, delighted in lævísí ‘treachery’ and changed shape. We may compare Grendel’s mother as trollish brinnwylf ‘sea-she-wolf’ in a turbulent mere beneath overhanging trees, and the association of the giantess-‘goddess’ Sinmara with both Mimi’s tree and læ (in Lævateinn). Noteworthy, too, is the gaping mouth of Nauma/Iðunn’s cave as the hjörgvæðir ‘sword-endower’ (Grettir) approached, as it appears to echo

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84 Guðný Jónsson, Grettis saga, 216–7; on the two stanzas, see Jorgensen, ‘Grendel, Grettir’.
85 Guðný Jónsson, Grettis saga, 217.
87 See ANEW s.v. and ÍO s.v.
88 Lassen, Hrafnagaldur, 85.
the *heorogifre* ‘sword-greedy’ nature of Grendel’s mother when Beowulf, armed with the sword Hrunting, approached her lair (*Beowulf* 1498).  

Second is an episode in the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century *Samsons saga fagra* ‘Saga of Samson the Fair’. It tells of an evil arch-thief and harpist called *Kvín(n)talín/Kvín(n)telín* (compare *Grendel*) who tried to abduct an Irish princess called Valentina. Kvintalin was the son of a British miller called *Galinn* ‘Bewitched’ and an anonymous *gyðja* ‘goddess’ who lived *undir mylnufossinum* ‘under the mill-waterfall/stream’. The fair English hero Samson, whose name probably derives ultimately from Hebrew *shemesh* ‘sun’, set out to find Valentina and sought Galinn’s help. He met him at the mill beside the waterfall, beneath which was *hylur djúpur með miklu iðukasti* ‘a deep hole with a great surging eddy’. While they were talking, Samson’s legs were seized, doubtless by the *gyðja*, and he was pulled down into the waterfall. At first he found himself powerless against the *gyðja*, now called a *tröllkona* ‘troll-woman’ (compare Nauma/Iðunn), but he managed to disembowel her with a knife which he had brought with him. He saw there a fine bed and many gold and silver treasures in a side-cave, from which he took what he wanted. He found it difficult to get out, but passed through a stone door and eventually returned to the settlements of men. He was then directed to Jarl Finnlaugr of Bretland, to whom he related events in detail and showed the treasures, as he did later to King Garlant of Ireland. He then sailed home to England, where he told his father, King Arthur, about his journeys.

Scholars have long recognized a parallel between this episode and *Beowulf*’s fight with Grendel’s mother and its aftermath, but they have not necessarily noted the correspondence of the subsequent displays of recovered treasure to lords who include a father-figure. Nor to my knowledge have they appreciated the significance of the whirlpool

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89 See further Chapter 15.
beneath the mill, which parallels not only the mill-whirlpool beneath which Sinmara resides but also the turbulent waters of Grendel’s mere, wherein lurks another maelstrom-giantess.

Grendel’s Mother as Maelstrom-Giantess

Sinmara’s home beneath a whirlpool, where she guarded Lævateininn, also finds parallel in the submarine abode of Grendel’s mother, within which the giant sword hung from a wall. *Beowulf* repeatedly describes the mere’s waters as moving, churning, grasping and dangerous: *atol yða geswing* ‘terrible swirl of waves’ (848), *wæteregeasan* ‘water-terrors’ (1260), *cealde streamas* ‘cold currents’ (1261), *yðgeblond/yðgebland* ‘wave-blending(s)’ (1373, 1620), *sundgebland* ‘water-blending’ (1450), *yða gewin* ‘strife of waves’ (1469), *holma geþring* ‘throng of waters’ (2132), *wælm* ‘whelm’ (2135). In addition, the mere is a place where waters go down, and when Beowulf dives in, the *brimwylm onfeng / hilderince* ‘sea-whelm took the battle-warrior’ (1494–5). This is all highly suggestive of a maelstrom. Also, inside Grendel’s hall Beowulf finds that *hrinan ne meahte / færgripe flodes* ‘the flood’s sudden grip could not touch (him)’ (1515–6)—we may perhaps compare the relatively calm ‘eye’ of a whirlpool. Additionally, once both Grendel and his mother were dead, *lagu drusade* ‘the lake subsided’ (1630), which attests to its former turbulence.

Noteworthy, too, is the poet’s description of how *Þonon yðgeblond up astiged / won to wolcnum þonne wind styreþ / lað gewidru, oð þæt lyft ðrysmaþ, roderas roetað* ‘From there [i.e., the mere] a wave-blending ascends up, dark, to the clouds, when the wind stirs up hostile weathers, until it chokes the air, the heavens weep’ (1373–6). This passage resembles an early medieval Irish account of a violent whirlpool, though I imply no direct relationship between the two. *Sanas Cormaic* ‘Cormac’s Glossary’ records how the Corryvreckan whirlpool off Rathlin Island, having swallowed water, vomited it to the sky, where its roaring was heard among the clouds.94 Furthermore, this whirlpool, like its namesake between the isles of Jura and Scarba in the Inner Hebrides, was popularly known as the ‘cauldron of the old woman’. She was possibly originally

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an Irish war-goddess, the *Morrigan/Mórrigan* ‘(Night)mare Queen’, the first element of whose name is cognate with *-mara* ‘(night)-mare (monster)’ in ON *Sinnara*. Grendel’s murderous mother was similarly an old woman, having kept watch over the waters of her mere for *hund missera* ‘a hundred half-years’ (1498). And, as we shall shortly see, she also acted in the manner of a ‘mare’-monster.

Together, then, *Svipdagsmál, Grettis saga, Samsons saga fagra* and *Beowulf* provide evidence that a nightmarish giantess, often associated with a male giant and a sword, was imagined to live beneath milling waters. Given the probable solar nature of the giant sword in *Beowulf*, this correspondence of locations and guardians inspires greater confidence that the similarly located and guarded Lævateinn was also radiant.

I shall return to *Svipdagsmál* toward the end of this study to elucidate further the myth that seems to underpin both it and *Fór Skírnis* in relation to *Beowulf*. In the next chapter, though, I turn to an examination of the solar associations of (Yngvi-)Freyr, with whom I have associated Hroðgar, and of Skírnir, with whom Beowulf and Svipdagr appear comparable.

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