The Waning Sword
Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in Beowulf

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9. Freyr’s Solar Power and the Purifying Sword

This chapter examines a variety of Old Norse sources to demonstrate the solar and related attributes of (Ingvi/Yngvi-)Freyr and his sword. We shall see that in Skírnir’s hands this weapon probably symbolizes a purifying sunbeam. These findings will inform our understanding of Hrunting and the giant sword as comparable weapons.

Solar Aspects of Freyr in the Eddas

In Gylfaginning, Snorri describes Freyr and his sister Freyja as *fogr álitum ok máttug* ‘fair in appearance and mighty’, before continuing:

Freyr is the most excellent of Æsir/gods. He rules over the rain and the sun’s shining and therewith the earth’s produce, and to him it is good to pray for fruitfulness and peace. He also rules the wealth of men.

Elsewhere, in chapter 10 of Ynglinga saga, Snorri describes Freyr as a king of the Swedes, a people who loved and worshipped him above other gods because they believed he brought them peace and good harvests, even after his death. They called him *veraldargóð* ‘god of the world’ and sacrificed to him *til árs ok friðar* ‘for a good harvest and peace’.

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1 See also Andrén, *Tracing*, 155–7, 189.
2 SnEGylf, 24.
3 SnEGylf, 24.
From these passages it appears clear that Freyr was an important fertility deity who could bestow benign growing weather, of which sunshine was a fundamental aspect.

In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri adds that Freyr rode, by night and day across sky and sea, a boar called *Gullinbu(r)sti* ‘Golden-Bristle(d)’ whose bristles illuminated the darkest places.\(^5\)

Among Snorri’s sources of information were *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál*, two of the most important mythological Eddic poems. They provide further details.

*Völuspá* 53 indicates that at Ragnarök Freyr will advance *bjartr* ‘bright’ against Surtr, before whom he will fall. The first half of the preceding stanza reads *Surtr ferr sunnan með sviga lævi,* // *scínn af sverði sól valtíva,* an ambiguous passage. It could mean either ‘Surtr fares from the south with the fraud/treason/bane of switches,\(^6\) the sun shines from the sword of the gods of the slain’ or ‘Surtr fares from the south with the fraud/treason/bane of switches, the sun of the gods of the slain shines from the sword’. Either way, the unique expression *sviga lævi* is usually interpreted as a kenning for ‘fire’, but it might more specifically be a kenning for a fiery twig-sword, specifically the solar sword of the following line.\(^7\) In that case, *sviga lævi* would be suggestive of *Lævateinn*, the probably radiant sword guarded by ‘Surtr’s Sinmara’ in *Svipdagsmál*. This, we have seen, may well be a mistletoe-weapon that at one time came into the possession of Svipdagr, a figure analogous to Skírnir and to Freyr.

*Grímnismál* 43 refers to *skírum Frey ‘clear/bright/shining Freyr’. Additionally, this poem’s fifth stanza records that Freyr owned *Álfheimr* ‘Elf-Home’, the world of elves. The intimacy of this race of creatures

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\(^6\) ‘Switch’ in the sense ‘thin, flexible twig’.

\(^7\) For an argument that Surtr’s use of a fiery sword at Ragnarök has a basis in Anglo-Saxon or related homiletic traditions about the fiery sword of God on Doomsday, see K. Samplonius, ‘The Background and Scope of *Völuspá*’, in T. Gunnell and A. Lassen (ed.), *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to *Völuspá* and Nordic Days of Judgement* (Turnhout, 2013), 113–45 at 117–126.
with the sun is indicated by the sun’s designation as álfröðull ‘elf-halo’ in two Eddic poems (Vafþrúðnismál 47; For Skírnis 4).  

Skírnir as Purifier

Further support for the concept of Freyr’s giant-fighting sword and the gambanteinn (and therefore, by likely analogy, Beowulf’s Hrunting and giant sword) as solar weapons exists in the name of their wielder, Skírnir. This word’s closest relatives are ON skírna ‘to become clear, brighten’ and skírn ‘baptism’. Another close relative is skírr ‘clear/bright/shining’, an adjective used of the sun and which we have just seen applied to Freyr in Grímnismál 43, and which also has the metaphorical sense ‘cleansed from guilt’. We may infer that Skírnir was a shining, purificatory...

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8 Also SnESkáld, I, 85. Note too that Snorri makes Álfheimr the home of the ljósálfar ‘light-elves’ specifically; SnEGylf, 19.

9 CV s.v. With the sword of Freyr/Skírnir which fought of its own accord against giants, if its owner was wise, we may also compare the sword of Edward the Confessor, which in Old Norse was called Skirteinn, literally ‘Pure/Bright-Twig’ (but note also skirteini ‘proof, evidence’), according to a probably thirteenth-century Icelandic story. Hemings báttr Ásláskssonar ‘The Tale of Hemingr Áslásksson’ records that Edward was a vitr maðr ‘wise man’ who, according to one character’s testimony, á eitt svæð, er Skirteinn heitir … En sú náttúra fyll sóm honum, at hverjum mænni verðr hann at bana, er lýgr; enn á þann bítr hann ekki sem satt segir ‘has a sword which is called Skirteinn … And its nature is such that it slays any man who lies, but it does not bite on the man who speaks truth’; Gudbrand Vigfússon and G. W. Dasent (ed. and trans.), Icelandic Sagas and Other Historical Documents Relating to the Settlements and Descents of the Northmen on the British Isles, 4 vols (London, 1887–94), I, 359–60; see also G. Fellows Jensen (ed.), Hemings báttr Ásláskssonar (Copenhagen, 1962), 29; A. Faulkes (trans.), Hemings báttr (Dundee, 2016), 22, where the name is translated ‘Proof’; Falk, Allnordische Waffenkunde, 55. The equivalent name in Old English would be *Scirtan, but ON Skirteinn may well be an adaptation of the sword’s Anglo-French name, Curteyn (itself from Latin curtus ‘shortened’). This word was latinized as Curtana, by which name its seventeenth-century replacement among the royal regalia of the British monarchy is still known, beside its ceremonial title of the ‘Sword of Mercy’, the foremost of the three ‘Swords of Justice’. On Curteyn/Curtana and its reproductions, see H. R. Luard (ed.), Matthæi Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora. Volume III: A.D. 1216 to A.D. 1239 (London, 1876), III, 337; Encyclopædia Britannica, 11th edn., art. ‘Curtana’; MED s.v. Curtana; M. Holmes, The Crown Jewels at the Tower of London, 3rd edn. (London, 1968); E. Mason, ‘The Hero’s Invincible Weapon: an Aspect of Angevin Propaganda’, in C. Harper-Bill and R. Harvey (ed.), The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood, 4 vols (Woodbridge, 1990), III, 121–37 at 134; E. M. R. Ditmas, ‘The Curtana or Sword of Mercy’, Journal of the British Archaeological Association 29 (1966), 122–33; E. M. R. Ditmas, ‘More Arthurian Relics’, Folklore 77 (1966), 91–104 at 91–3. Cf., in Beowulf, the patterned sword which scyran moste, cwealmbealu cyðan ‘had to make (it) clear/settle (it), make its mortal attack known’ (1939–40).
figure who wielded weapons with the same properties against giants.\textsuperscript{10} Although the cleansing aspect of Skírnir’s nature is understandably obscured in \textit{Fgr Skírnis}, a poem in which a radiant giantess is the object of desire, his efforts nevertheless succeed in transforming her frosty standoffishness into a warm acceptance of sexual union with Freyr.

Judging from various Norse sources, a purificatory function for Skírnir’s weapons would be in keeping with the general conception of their victims, the giants, as disease-spirits responsible for the affliction of women in particular. The \textit{Icelandic Rune Poem}, which is first attested in sixteenth-century manuscripts but probably preserves earlier traditions, explains the name of the \textit{Þurs}-rune (\textit{Þ}) thus: \textit{Þ er kvenna ku}\textit{ǫl} ‘\textit{Þ}r [i.e., ‘giant’] is women’s torment’.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, the \textit{Swedish Rune Poem}, preserved in a letter dated 1600, states that \textit{Tors qūin ne qūāl} ‘Giant (is) women’s torment’.\textsuperscript{12} Similarly again, the \textit{Norwegian Rune Poem}, which survives in seventeenth-century copies, records that \textit{Þ uældr kuenna k[villu]} ‘\textit{Þ}r causes women’s sickness’.\textsuperscript{13} The torment and sickness in question in these poems is presumably either menstruation or labour, or both.

Ironically, then, it would seem that by inscribing (or threatening to inscribe) the \textit{Þurs}-rune on the \textit{gambanteinn}, the purifying Skírnir may have been inflicting—or probably rather threatening to inflict—a painful, bloody flood upon Gerðr,\textsuperscript{14} although he does promise to remove the inscription if she accedes to his wishes. As touched on

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnote}{10} Cf. G. Steinsland, ‘Pagan Myth in Confrontation with Christianity: \textit{Skírnismál} and \textit{Genesis},’ in T. Ahlbäck (ed.), \textit{Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names} (Åbo, 1990), 316–28 at 324: ‘Skírnir may be interpreted as “Baptizer”, he then turns out to be a pagan parallel to the Baptist, the forerunner of the Saviour’.
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\begin{footnote}{11} R. I. Page, \textit{The Icelandic Rune-Poem} (London, 1999), 27, 35; Bauer, \textit{Runengedichte}, 165.\end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{12} Bauer, \textit{Runengedichte}, 212. Also note an episode in \textit{SKáldskaparmál} in which the bloody(?) effusion of the giantess Gjálp into the river Vimur threatens to overwhelm Þórr, until he stems the flow with the help of a rowan-bush; \textit{SnESkald}, I, 25.\end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{13} Bauer, \textit{Runengedichte}, 118 (adapted).\end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{14} This interpretation is compatible with the notion of giants identified with the moon (for which see especially Chapter 14), which was traditionally believed to govern menstruation on the basis that the lunar and menstrual cycles roughly coincide. See Cashford, \textit{Moon}, 202–9; Krupp, \textit{Beyond the Blue Horizon}, 70–1; S. Cohen, ‘Melatonin, Menstruation and the Moon’, \textit{Townsend Letter for Doctors \\& Patients} (February 2005), 94–6. From this perspective, Skírnir’s threat might be to turn Gerðr, a likely lunar giantess, into a ‘blood-moon’, an eclipse phenomenon in which the moon turns blood-red, as noted in entries for the years 734 and 1117 in the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle}.\end{footnote}
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earlier, we may compare Beowulf’s attacking of Grendel’s mother with the giant sword, a weapon inscribed (though not by him) with runes describing events or behaviour that resulted in the giants’ destruction in the Flood. Comparably as well, Beowulf’s decapitation of Grendel’s mother and Grendel polluted the waters of the mere with blood, which were, however, soon cleansed by, or following, the melting of the giant sword (see below).

Admittedly, the Norse rune poems are attested only in manuscript texts much younger than For Skírnis. But that the Norse þurs was perceived long before, in early post-Conquest England, as a creature which caused a blood-related affliction is probably shown by the Old Danish Canterbury Runic Charm, preserved in a manuscript completed in 1073.\textsuperscript{15} A transliteration of its runes into normalized Old Norse reads:

\begin{verbatim}
\end{verbatim}

\textit{Gyril sárþvara} ['Gore-Smearer(?) of the wound-borer/shortsword'], go now, you are found! May Þórr ‘consecrate’ you, lord of giants, \textit{Gyril sárþvara}. Against veins’ rushing/harm/pus.

Here the afflicting þurs ‘giant’ is called \textit{Gyril} of the \textit{sárþvari} ‘wound-borer/shortsword’, the latter word being an otherwise unattested compound noun synonymous with the dwarf-name \textit{Dolgþvari} and the ‘sword’-term \textit{benþvari}.\textsuperscript{17} The combination of \textit{Gyril} (compare ON \textit{gyrja} ‘to gore’) and a term for ‘sword’ in a remedy against a rushing of (i.e., gushing from?) the veins suggests a cure for profuse bleeding or bloody suppuration, one in which a hidden sword-bearing disease-giant is destroyed, implicitly by Þórr’s fulgural hammer, a holy weapon of light; this weapon is similarly used to \textit{vigja} ‘consecrate’ (i.e., kill) Þrymr, the \textit{þursa dróttinn} ‘lord of giants’ of \textit{Þrymskviða}.


\textsuperscript{16} McKinnell, Simek and Düwel, \textit{Runes}, 127.

\textsuperscript{17} On \textit{þvari}, see \textit{PTP}, 793.
Two variants of the *Canterbury Runic Charm* from Sigtuna, Sweden—a possibly late eleventh-century runic inscription on a copper amulet, and a runic inscription of similar date on a rib bone—point to a cure for a fever associated with a wound. This has been taken to refer to a gangrenous wound, though a raised temperature may also accompany menstruation, as may a potentially very dangerous fever.

Beowulf and the Giant Sword as Purifiers

Skírnir’s name suggests that he was a purifier. Beowulf certainly was. The Geat’s aim in coming to Denmark was specifically *Heorot fælsian* ‘to cleanse Heorot’ (*Beowulf* 432) by killing Grendel, which he did: *hæfde þa gefælsod ... sele Hroðgares* ‘he had then cleansed ... Hroðgar’s hall’ (825–6); *Heorot is gefælsod* ‘Heorot is cleansed’ (1176); *sele fælsode* ‘he cleansed the hall’ (2352).

Beowulf’s giant sword, probably a solar weapon, also invites linkage with Skírnir. Our ultimate focus with regard to this weapon is its hilt, the golden plates(adorning which were *sciran* ‘bright’ (1694). This adjective, which also describes God, the *scir metod* ‘bright Meter (of judgement upon Grendel)’ (979), is cognate with ON *skírr* and therefore with *Skírnir*. If the purifying function of Skírnir is obscure in *Fær Skírnis*, it is explicit for Beowulf in relation to Heorot, as we have seen. It also seems clear, though not explicit, for the giant sword. After its blade had beheaded Grendel and then melted in Beowulf’s hand, the mere’s bloody, turbulent waters were *eal gefælsod* ‘all cleansed’ (1620). Specifically:

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\begin{align*}
wæron yðgebland & \quad eal gefælsod, \\
eacne eardas, & \quad þa se ellorgast \\
oflet lifdagas & \quad ond þas lænan gesceaft. (1620–2)
\end{align*}
\]

the wave-blendings [i.e., turbulent waters] were all cleansed, the increased/im immense estates, when the alien-spirit/guest relinquished life-days and this loaned/transitory/mutable/perishable creation.

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18 McKinnell, Simek and Düwel, *Runes*, 126–7; see also Hall, ‘Pur sarriþu’.
The wording of the last line seems carefully chosen. Although the words *þas lænan gesceaft* ‘this loaned/transitory creation’ undoubtedly denote principally ‘this created world/life’, they also invite secondary association with another loaned and relinquished creation, a conceptually living entity which has only just been described in a memorable image of transience. That creation is the giant sword, a *geworht* ‘wrought’ (1696) weapon of macrocosmic significance. Its blade, whose shining probably suggested the birth of a new day in the mere (cf. *lifdagas* ‘lifedays’ here), has only just melted, inspiring a prominent image of the world’s transience which also suggests the weapon’s uncreation and the mere’s resulting enlargement (*eacne*) with meltwater conceptually from the weapon’s formerly ‘enlarged/increased’ state (*eacnum ecgum* ‘increased edges’, 2140). Additionally, if my interpretation of the giant sword’s history is correct, this weapon was only ever, in a sense, ‘loaned’ to the giants, who had stolen or arrogated it.\(^{20}\)

In light of the baptismal connotation of the name *Skírnir*, we may also recall the baptismal associations of the Beowulf’s immersion in and emersion from the mere, together with the giant sword’s subtle identification with a candle, perhaps even the Paschal Candle. Baptism, of course, is a sacrament of purification.

Additionally, our understanding of the giant sword as a purificatory weapon may be enriched by the aforementioned amulet from Sigtuna. A second runic inscription on the amulet’s other side reads (in emended form and with normalized Old Norse spelling):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Haf þér þrjár þrár, úlfr!} \\
\text{Haf þér niú nauðir, úlfri!} \\
\text{iii ísir, þurs! Ísir! Ísir! Auk, [or ok] íss! Unir, úlfri!} \\
\text{Njót lyfja.}^{21}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{20}\) The quoted passage contains the first of four instances of *læne* ‘loaned/transient/perishing’ in *Beowulf*, all of which concern both a dead treasure-owner and his treasure. In line 1754, during the ‘sermon’ Hroðgar gives while gazing upon the hilt of the giant sword, he warns Beowulf that the *læne* body of the covetous man declines, leaving another man to distribute his treasure. In line 2845, after the deaths of Beowulf and the dragon, we hear, in the context of rusting treasures in the dragon’s mound, that either had reached the end *lænan lifes* ‘of loaned life’. In line 3129, we learn that these treasures lie *læne* in the mound, unguarded after the dragon’s death.

\(^{21}\) Adapted from McKinnell, Simek and Düwel, *Runes*, 126; see further MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, 118–21.
Have yourself three throes, wolf! Have yourself nine needs, wolf! Three ices, giant! Ice! Ices! Increase, [or ‘and’] ice! May you enjoy, wolf! Use to heal [or ‘Make use of the healing charms’].

It is natural to assume that these words, addressed with mock generosity to a disease-spirit described as both wolf and giant, remedy the same affliction as the charm on the other side. In that case, we have an invocation of the power of increasing ‘icles’—possibly lengthening icicles (note the visual appearance of $\text{iii}$)—to cure a bloody wound-fever caused by a wolfish $\text{þyrs}$. We might compare these to the icicles with which the blade of the rune-inscribed giant sword melted in the hot blood of Grendel’s mother and her son, who are similarly wolfish $\text{þyrs}$ ‘giant’-monsters (OE $\text{þyrs}$ and ON $\text{þurs}$ are cognate). The Sigtuna amulet may help us perceive that, as Beowulf’s sun-like giant sword burned and melted, its ‘battle-icles’ fought the bloody heat and pollution of lupine giants.22

**Freyr as Thawer**

The giant sword’s melting provides another basis for linking this weapon with Freyr as a sun-controlling god, because, as we have seen, *Beowulf* draws an analogy between this dissolution and the loosening of frosty ‘bonds’, the unwinding of icy ‘ropes’ by a paternal deity ($\text{fæder}$ ‘father’ 1609) during the spring thaw, when the sun strengthens (1607–11). Ostensibly, this paternal deity is the Judaeo-Christian God, but the description would also suit Freyr, a dynastic progenitor who $\text{leysir or hoptum hvern}$ ‘loosens everyone from fetters’ (*Lokasenna* 37). Furthermore, the thirteenth-century Icelandic *Gísla saga Súrssonar* ‘Saga of Gísli Sursson’ attributes Freyr the friendly power to prevent freezing, presumably due to his command of the sun:

Varð ok sá hlutr einn, er nýnæmum þótti gegna, at aldri festi snæ útan ok sunnan á haugi Þorgríms ok eigi fraus; ok gátu menn þess til, at hann myndi Frey svá ávarðr fyrir blótin, at hann myndi eigi vilja, at frøri á milli þeira.23

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22 Note also the ‘Out fire, in frost’ formula attested in English charms for burns from the fifteenth century onwards. J. Roper, *English Verbal Charms* (Helsinki, 2005), 116 claims it derives from ‘a self-standing Old English (or more widespread Germanic) formula’, but it is not found in surviving Old English records.

23 Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Vestfirðinga sogur*, ÍF 6 (Reykjavik, 1943), 57.
There also came to pass that unique thing, which seemed to amount to a novelty, that snow never settled outside and on the south side of Þorgrimr’s grave-mound, and it did not freeze; and people guessed that was because he [i.e., Þorgrimr] would have been so dear to Freyr, on account of the sacrifices, that he [i.e., Freyr] would not wish that it should freeze between them.  

A similar divine power is implicit in chapter 15 of the thirteenth-century Icelandic Vatnsdœla saga ‘Saga of the People of Vatnsdalr’, a story linked to the mythology of Freyr. Ingimundr ‘Ingi-Hand/Protection’ Þorsteinsson travelled from Norway to Iceland in pursuit of a figurine of Freyr, which had mysteriously disappeared from his possession and which, it was prophesied, now resided in Iceland in the place where he was destined to make his home; according to the king of Norway, it had been directed there by Freyr. Having temporarily stopped in a valley which seemed continually beset by a snowstorm, Ingimundr’s men spotted fells to the north which were, by contrast, snjólaus mjölk ‘very snowless’ and pleasing to look at. Ingimundr went there, found where the figurine lay buried, and set up home. He called his new farmstead Hof ‘Temple’.  

Additionally, such a power doubtless accounts for the replacement of snow and ice by a remarkable spell of fair weather in Ǫgmundar þáttr dyttis. When the nominally Christian Gunnarr assumed Freyr’s identity, veðrit tók at birta ‘the weather began to brighten’.  

To my knowledge, no medieval source attributes such power over both sun and ice to another Norse god.

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24 Similarly, chapter 5 of Ketils saga hængs records that a viking king of Sweden and his men made heathen sacrifices at Árhaugr ‘(Good) Season Burial-Mound’, on which no snow settled. Freyr is not named, but his involvement seems likely; FSN, II, 173–6.


26 Jónas Kristjánsson, Eyfriðinga sagnur, 114.