The Waning Sword
Conversion Imagery and Celestial Myth in Beowulf

Edward Pettit
That Grendel and his mother—two ellorgæstas ‘alien visitors/spirits’ or ‘visitors/spirits from elsewhere’ (1349)—may have a mythologically lunar aspect is not readily apparent from Beowulf. If present, this aspect lies in the background, though it may have been more apparent to an Anglo-Saxon audience than it is today. It is chiefly further comparative evidence from Old English and Old Norse texts that now suggests this dimension to their nature. I have already adduced some of this evidence, the clearest being the similarities between Grendel’s mere and the Lake of the Moon in Wonders, between Grendel’s mother and the giantess Mâna ‘Moon’ (about whom more below) in Sörla saga sterka, and between Grendel and the lunar thief of Riddle 29. The present chapter advances further evidence. It progresses from analysis of lunar and solar imagery in another Old English prose text preceding Beowulf in Cotton Vitellius A.xv, and of the Anglo-Latin Liber monstrorum, to the words of Beowulf (especially the noun nið), and then further evidence for the presence of lunar and solar myth in Old Norse texts. The penultimate section offers further thoughts on the relationship of the monsters of the Danish mere, and their decapitation, to imagery of the moon’s waning. Finally, I address the possible symbolic significance of Beowulf’s return to Heorot bearing the head of Grendel and the hilt of the giant sword.

The quantity of comparative evidence adduced in this chapter and preceding ones, some of which is obscure but coherent, together with the lack of obvious dependency of many of the cited sources upon each other, suggests the likelihood of widespread early traditions about giants and giantesses associated with the moon. If accepted, this finding is likely to enrich our understanding of the nocturnal giants of Beowulf and their temporary possession of, and ultimate defeat by, a giant sun-like sword.
Trees of Sun and Moon, and a Monster Called Quasi Caput Luna

Anglo-Saxons who came to Beowulf after reading or listening to the preceding texts in Cotton Vitellius A.xv would do so primed for solar and lunar marvels. Even if they had forgotten the Lakes of the Sun and Moon in Wonders, fresh in their memory would be the solar and lunar imagery at the end of the Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, the prose text which comes immediately before Beowulf and which was transcribed by the same scribe who wrote the preceding texts of the Passion of St Christopher and Wonders and the first 1,939 lines of Beowulf itself.1 For the Old English Letter, a translation of the Latin Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem, concludes with a long passage concerning the oracular Trees of the Sun (male) and Moon (female). Not only that, but such Anglo-Saxons would probably recall the unusual detail that these trees wept greatly during eclipses for þon hie ondredon þæt hie heora godmægne sceoldon beon benumene ‘because they feared that they would be deprived of their divine power’.2

Beowulf has no equivalent pair of trees.3 Nevertheless, the concern of the solar and lunar trees about the loss of divine power during eclipses represents, I believe, a thematic parallel to the basis of at least the middle section of Beowulf in mythological traditions about the sun’s recovery of light which had been stolen or arrogated by the moon. The possibility that this parallel is significant is strengthened by the presence of another likely correspondence found earlier in the Letter’s description of a certain deor ‘beast’:

Da wæs þæt lond eall swa we geferdon adrugad ond fen, ond cannon ond hreod weoxan. Da cwom þær semninga sum deor of þæm fenne ond of þæm fæstene. Wæs þæm deore eall se hrycg acæglod swelce snoda. Hæfde þæt deor seonowealt heafod swelce mona, ond þæt deor hatte Quasi Caput Luna, ond him wær ða breost gelice niccrez breastum, ond heardum toðum ond

---

1 On links between the Letter and Beowulf, including a continuity of heroic theme and similarities of wording between the end of the former and the start of the latter, see Orchard, Critical Companion, 25–39; Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 139; Frank, ‘Scandal’, 862.
2 Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 246–53, with quotation at 248.
3 Note, however, the frosty trees that overhang Grendel’s mere in misty gloom beneath weeping skies (Beowulf 1363–4, 1375–6); cf. Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 45.
miclum hit wæs gegyred ond geteþed. Ond hit þa þæt deor ofsloh mine þegnas twegen. Ond we þa þæt deor nowþer ne mid spere gewundigan ne meahte ne mid nænige wæpne, ac we hit unaþe mid isernum hamerum ond slecgum gefyldon ond hit ofbeoton.⁴

Then all the land we [i.e., Alexander the Great and his men] came to was dried up and fen, and canes and reeds grew there. Then there came suddenly a certain beast from the fen and from the fastness. The beast’s back was all studded like a snood; the beast had a round/concave head like the moon, and the beast was called Quasi Caput Luna ‘Head Like the Moon’, and its breasts were like the breasts of a nicor, and with hard and large teeth it was equipped and toothed. And it, that beast, then killed two of my thanes. And then by no means could we wound the beast with spear or with any weapon, but with difficulty we felled it with iron hammers and mallets and beat it to death.

The description of this bizarre monster (originally apparently a crocodile) by the Old English translator, whose precise Latin source has apparently not survived,⁵ is suggestive of Grendel and his mother. They similarly came from fen and fastness, and were associated with

---

⁴ Adapted from Fulk, Beowulf Manuscript, 64.
⁵ The Latin source presumably included the words quasi caput luna, which seem not to appear in any extant version of the Epistola. The relevant passage from the published text in Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 214, reads as follows (with my translation):


There was a dry swamp with abundant reeds. When we attempted to cross it, a new kind of beast leapt forward with a serrated back. It had two heads, one like the moon [v.l. a lioness], with hippopotamus breast, the other appearing just like a crocodile’s fortified with hard teeth, which head killed two soldiers in a sudden strike. We just about crushed with iron hammers what we could not transfix with spears [reading hastis for hostis]. We wondered at its strangeness for a long time.

See further, ibid., 127, including the observation that several manuscripts of the Epistola do not state that the beast had two heads. For a later English translation of the Epistola, in which the beast again has two heads (that oon like to the moone, with a short brest of a cocodril beryng; that other harneised and arraied with the most hardest teeth), see V. DiMarco and L. Perelman, The Middle English Letter of Alexander to Aristotle (Amsterdam, 1978), 82, 84; the editors consider the Latin reading leanae ‘lioness’ to be ‘more comprehensible’ than lunae ‘moon’ (161).
more than one nicor ‘sea/water-monster’, their mere being home to such creatures. Grendel and his mother were also monsters (surely powerfully toothed) who killed thanes. And they could not be wounded by conventional piercing weapons (although neither was beaten to death). As Andy Orchard has observed, such correspondences between Beowulf and the Letter probably arise because the translator of the Latin Epistola ‘knew the poem [i.e., Beowulf] at first hand, and consciously developed hints in his original text in a way which deliberately drew on aspects of Beowulf’.6

The Beowulf-poet surrounds Grendel and his mother with an aura of terror partly by being vague about their overall physical appearance but alarmingly precise about specific details, such as Grendel’s horrific claw and horribly illuminated eyes.7 How Anglo-Saxons may have imagined Grendel and his mother to look outside Beowulf (assuming references to a certain Grendel in place-names do not wholly derive from the poem) we do not know. But we can say that, in lieu of a precise description of the physical form of Grendel and his mother in Beowulf, attentive listeners who knew of Quasi Caput Luna would be encouraged to imagine him or her (or both) having a head like the moon, if they did not already. Possibly this head would be large, round, pale, cratered and sometimes bloody, but, as both Grendel and his dam were devils (deofla 1680), it might also have borne horns shaped like a crescent moon;8 the two possibilities are not, of course, mutually exclusive because the moon waxes and wanes. It will be recalled, however, that Riddle 29 describes its Grendel-like moon-creature, which bears pilfered sunlight on its head, as horned (a crescent moon), and implicitly identifies it with the Devil, a link corroborated by other Christian writings.9 Grendel and his mother,
furthermore, descended from Cain, who was horned in Hebrew tradition and medieval Europe, and who, in later medieval tradition at least, was identified as the Man in the Moon.

That at least one Anglo-Saxon considered the Epistola’s moon-like-headed beast to be horned is shown by the Liber monstrorum, whose anonymous author may well have been ‘a contemporary—perhaps a colleague or disciple—of Aldhelm [d. 709 or 710]’. This work is often cited in connection with Beowulf because of the reference in its first book, in a passage on monstra mirae magnitudinis ‘monsters of marvellous size’, to King Higlacus (Beowulf’s Hygelac). We learn that, from the age of twelve, Higlacus was too big for a horse (in the Old English poem his nephew Beowulf never rides either); that he was killed by the Franks (a demise also mentioned in Beowulf); and that his bones were displayed on an island in the Rhine. This evidence that the two texts have common interests reinforces the significance of other parallels from the second book.

The Liber monstrorum’s passage about the beast with the moon-like head, which is evidently based on a different version of the Epistola, reads as follows (2.22):

Ferunt et in India beluam fuisse quae habuit bina capita, alterum lunae bicornis ut puta imaginem, alterum corcodrilli gerebat. Et tergo serrato [v.l. ferrato] et saeuis armata dentibus quondam in Alexandri milites prosiliens duos occidisse describitur.

And they say that in India there was a beast which had two heads, one bearing the image of a two-horned moon (believe it!), the other of a crocodile. And armed with serrated [v.l. iron-covered] back and savage teeth, it is described as once having rushed forward and killed two soldiers of Alexander.

---

10 J. L. Kugel, Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998), 737; R. Mellinkoff, The Mark of Cain (Berkeley, 1981), 63, pl. 7, 8; Williams, Deformed Discourse, 73. According to a probably eighth-century Irish or Irish-influenced Bible commentary, some people say quod in similitudine cerui occisus est ‘that he [i.e., Cain] was killed in the likeness of a stag’; G. MacGinty (ed.), The Reference Bible, Das Bibelwerk inter pauca problemata de enigmatibus ex tomis canonici nunc prompta sunt praefatio et libri de Pentateuco Moysi (Turnhout, 2000), 99.


14 Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 300–1.
Although by itself this parallel is not immediately suggestive of Grendel, other tantalizing indications of common ground with *Beowulf* become apparent from surrounding passages. Thus, the subjects of sections 19 to 28 of the *Liber monstrorum*’s second book run as follows:¹⁵

2.19: Dogs with the hind parts of fish in the Mediterranean Sea; Scylla, the monster surrounded by sea-dogs, who destroyed Ulysses’ ship. (Compare Grendel’s mother as *brimwylf* in the sea-like mere, and the mere-monsters’ likely attacks on ships in *Beowulf* 1425–30.)

2.20: Nocturnal beasts, or rather *dira prodigia* ’dire prodigies/wonders’, which assume the form of other beasts when pursued. (Compare the nocturnal Grendel as a *wiht unhælo* ‘creature of ill-omen’ 120, and his sketchily defined mother.)

2.21: The Nile’s production of all kinds of monsters. (Compare the water-monsters of Grendel’s mere.)

2.22: The monster with a moon-like head. (Compare Grendel.)

2.23: A beast so venomous that its blood melts the cutting edges of an iron weapon. This passage, for which there is no known source, merits quotation as a significant parallel to the melting of the giant sword in giant-blood:

> Bestia autem illa inter omnes beluas dirissima fertur, in qua tantam ueneni copiam adfirmant ut eam sibi leones quamuis inualidioris feram corporis, timeant, et tantam uim eius uenenum habere arbitrantur, ut eo licet ferri acies intincta liquescat.¹⁶

> But that beast is considered among the direst of all wild animals in which, they assert, there is such an abundance of venom that lions fear it, although it is a beast of weaker body, and they judge that its venom has such strength that it melts the sharp edges of an iron weapon/sword that is steeped in it.

---

¹⁵ Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 298–301. For other parallels and discussion, see *ibid.*, 86–115.

¹⁶ Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 300.
2.24: By the Euphrates, an antelope that has long horns in the shape of a saw, with which it cuts down huge oak trees. (A distortion of stags’ rubbing of their pronged antlers on trees to remove the covering velvet; compare *Beowulf*’s strong-antlered stag which flees to a wood and would rather die on the mere’s shore than enter its waters.)

2.25: Crocodiles that sun themselves on the banks of the Nile, but also frequent the water and attack passing people. (Compare the water-monsters that lie on the mere’s headlands and swim dangerously in its waters in *Beowulf* 1425–30.)

2.26: The intolerable *balena* ‘whale’. (Compare Grendel’s mother as a monstrous fish, an image I discuss in Chapter 15.)

2.27: The Ganges’ production of gold, precious stones and monstrous races. (Compare the monstrous creatures of the mere and the treasures therein, which included the gold-hilted giant sword.)

2.28: Two-footed horses, with equine front and piscine rear, in the Mediterranean. (Compare the likely equine aspect of the monsters called *nicoras* in the mere;\(^1\) also Vargeisa as a partly equine *finngälkn* comparable to Grendel’s mother.)

Clearly, these parallels are imprecise, and individually they might be dismissed as insignificant. But their consecutive nature and collective number, to which other nonconsecutive similarities might be added, strengthens the belief that there is a relationship between the *Liber monstrorum* and the parts of *Beowulf* focused on the mere and its creatures, even if that relationship cannot be defined precisely.

Aside from the parallel with *Quasi Caput Luna*, other aspects of Grendel and his mother are compatible with a lunar nature. Most obviously, both giants attack only by night. Both have a lupine aspect or lupine connections, which could link them to the implicitly lunar wolves imagined to devour the sun (and therefore in at least some cases identified with the eclipsing dark moon), according to Norse traditions we examined earlier. Both were also thieves, whose activities

---
\(^1\) See Chapter 3 n. 33; *OED* s.v. *nicker* n.\(^1\)
the moon traditionally oversaw. And on his last and most famous visit to Heorot, Grendel is described as scriðan (703), a verb meaning ‘gliding’, ‘creeping’, ‘wandering’ which can also describe the gliding motion of (among other things) heavenly bodies. Below I examine further evidence pointing to these giants’ lunar connections. It includes indications of the likely equivalence of Grendel and Vǫluspá’s lunar pitchforker, and of these monsters’ mothers.

Grendel the Wan

Grendel is a creature of the night. He attacked Heorot at night, at least once in the uhta (or uhte), the hour of darkness before dawn, this being the deepest part of the night. Thus, early in the poem we hear that after Grendel had attacked Heorot, Da ðæs on uhtan mid ærdæge / Grendles guðcraeft gumum undyrne (125–6), a passage that might be inelegantly translated as ‘Then at the juncture of the last hour of darkness with dawn Grendel’s battle-strength was unsecret [i.e., revealed] to men’; more clearly, Beowulf fought and dismembered Grendel in uhthelm þone ‘the hour-before-dawn uproar/crash’ (2007). As one scholar has recently observed, Grendel’s identification with darkness and its forces is ‘so fundamental to his character that it is often taken for granted in analysis of Beowulf’. It should not be, however, because Grendel may

---

18 Cf. OED s.v. ‘moon-man’ 1: ‘One whose occupation is pursued by moonlight; a “night-walker”; one who robs by night’; Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I (1.2): ‘the fortune of us that are the moon’s men doth ebb and flow like the sea, being governed, as the sea is, by the moon. As, for proof, now: a purse of gold most resolutely snatched on Monday night …’ (my emphasis).
19 Cf. Beowulf 163, 650, 2569 (of the dragon in the last instance). Cf. also the creeping motion of the crocodile which lies behind Quasi Caput Luna.
20 See BT s.v. scriðan III; cf. scriðe ‘course, orbit’.
21 Although evidence of the belief that wolves howl at the moon appears lacking from medieval Europe, of interest for the interpretation of the troll-man Grendel is the belief that humans change into wolves according to the moon’s phases. This is explicit in an early thirteenth-century English text, Gervase of Tilbury’s Otia Imperialia ‘Recreation for an Emperor’; see A. Pluskowski, Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages (Woodbridge, 2006), 178. See also Ármann Jakobsson, Nine Norse Studies, 144–7 on the possibly moon-influenced transformation of a trollish man called Kveld-Úlfr ‘Evening Wolf’ in Egils saga Skallagrímsonar.
22 Comparably, the nocturnal dragon which Beowulf later fights is an uhtsceæða ‘uht-predator’ (2271) and an uhtfliga ‘uht-flier’ (2760). On OE uhtal/uhte, uht-, see F. Tupper, Jr., ‘Anglo-Saxon daeg-mæl’, PMLA 10 (1895), 111–241 at 146–9.
well be linked especially with the moon’s waning and dark phases, which were widely considered times for wicked deeds.\textsuperscript{24}

Grendel is introduced as a tormented creature who dwelt \textit{in þystrum ‘in darkness’} (\textit{Beowulf} 87) within earshot of Heorot. From there he heard the hall-poet’s account of the Creation, including \textit{sunnan ond monan, leoman to leohte landbuendum ‘of the sun and the moon, luminaries as light for land-dwellers’} (94–5), which inspired him to attack with presumably jealous rage. Although this passage contains the only instance of the noun \textit{mona ‘moon’} in \textit{Beowulf}, this need not indicate, as Herbert G. Wright claims, that ‘the moon can play no part as a background to the first half of the poem’.

For the moon appears regularly absent, failing to appear for two or three days during the dark phase of its cycle, between its waning and waxing. As Godfrid Storms observes: ‘It is not too difficult to imagine the impact on the Anglo-Saxon audience of a monster prowling about their dwellings on a moonless night, when every rustling sound outside represented unknown dangers.’

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that it is a dark moon (now called a ‘new moon’) that we see during solar eclipses, when it appears as a sinister black silhouette crossing the sun.\textsuperscript{27} At such times, the moon has often been imagined as a monster devouring the sun, as in the case of myths examined earlier.\textsuperscript{28}

In an annular solar eclipse, furthermore, the dark moon is surrounded

\textsuperscript{24} M. Leach and J. Fried (ed.), \textit{Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend} (San Francisco, 1972, rpt. 1984), 744. A scientific study of lions finds that they attack most often when the moon is waning, and the same may be the case with other predators, such as wolves: see ‘Maneaters Most Likely to Strike after Full Moon’, \textit{The Guardian} (20 July 2011), https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/jul/20/lion-attacks-on-humans-moon. Additionally, Grendel might preserve a memory of the worldwide dust veil that dimmed the sun for years following a meteor strike or immense volcanic eruption in 536; for this event and its possible inspiration of \textit{Fimbulvæter}, the ‘Mighty Winter’ which precedes Ragnarök, and even (in Bo Gräslund’s view) of the main monsters of \textit{Beowulf}, see Andrén, \textit{Tracing}, 178–85; Gräslund, \textit{Beowulfkvädet}.

\textsuperscript{25} H. G. Wright, ‘Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in \textit{Beowulf}’, \textit{RES} 8 (1957), 1–11 at 5.

\textsuperscript{26} G. Storms, ‘Grendel the Terrible’, \textit{NM} 73 (1972), 427–36 at 433. Neither, however, is this imagining wholly straightforward, as ‘The experience of absolute darkness, unlit by any artificial means, is one of the many human experiences that urbanization has made increasingly rare for most of us’; E. J. Sharpe, ‘The Old English Runic Paternoster’, in H. R. E. Davidson (ed.), \textit{Symbols of Power} (Cambridge, 1973), 41–60 at 41.

\textsuperscript{27} This fact was known to Bede; see Wallis, \textit{Bede}, 80. It was first firmly established very much earlier, in seventh-century BC Mesopotamia; see Panchenko, ‘Solar Light’, 22.

\textsuperscript{28} See also Tylor, \textit{Primitive Culture}, I, 329–35.
by a flickering ring suggestive of the dark ‘flicker-flame’ through which Skírnir rode to meet Gerðr.  

A deorc ðeospcua ‘dark death-shadow’ (160), Grendel not only dwelt in darkness but attacked in darkness, as one of the scaduhelma gesceapu ‘shapes/creatures of shadow-helms [i.e., dark nights or the cover of such]’ (650). Similarly, as noted earlier, he inhabited Heorot sweartum nihtum ‘on dark nights’ (167). There are no darker nights than those of a dark moon, especially when the stars are obscured, as they surely would be above Grendel’s cloudy, misty mere. What is more, late Anglo-Saxon tradition records that nights of the waning moon are representative and reflective of man’s mortality and the world’s decline; the Danes of Heorot, demoralized by and helpless to prevent Grendel’s attacks, may well have agreed.

A link between Grendel and the moon’s waning may lie behind the repeated association of him, his actions and his environs with wan(n)/won(n) ‘dark’, ‘black’, ‘lacking light’, which also appears in the poem as a negative prefix. Even if this word is not securely relatable to the verb wanian ‘to wane, dwindle’, which, then as now, could describe

29 Cf. E. G. Suhr, *The Mask, the Unicorn and the Messiah: A Study in Solar Eclipse Symbolism* (New York, 1970), 165: ‘the moon was … the island surrounded by flame. Only the hero could penetrate beyond the water or fire.’ Cf. too the fire on, or in, Grendel’s mere, though it occurred only by night.

30 E.g., R. Morris (ed.), *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century*, EETS o.s. 58, 63, 73 (London, 1880), 17: þonne se mona wanað, þonne tacnað he ure deaþlicnesse, & þisse worlde wanunge ‘When the moon wanes, then it betokens our mortality, and the waning of this world’; Blake, Ælfric’s *De Temporibus Anni*, 78: Seo is … waniende þurh forðfarendum ‘[i.e., the moon] is … waning on account of those passing away’; see also Thorpe, *Homilies*, I, 154; additionally ibid., 102 for the belief that all earthly creatures are fulre and margenfaestre on fullum monan þonne on gewanedum ‘fuller and stronger in a full moon than in a waned (moon)’. Cf. in stanza 12 of the Old Norse Eddic poem *Guðrúnarkviða II* ‘The Second Lay of Guðrún’, Guðrún’s reflection upon her grief for her dead husband: ‘Nótt þótti mér niðmyrkr vera, / er ek sárla satk yfir Sigurðr’ ‘“Night seemed to me to be new-moon dark, when I sat sorrowfully over Sigurðr.”’

31 It is also noteworthy that the presence of clouds and disturbed air above Grendel’s mere (1373–6), and the surging of the mere before Beowulf beheads Grendel and his mother, correspond closely to what Bede tells us about the power of the new moon; see Wallis, *Bede*, 81–2. Tiddy Mun, a late Lincolnshire folk-tale concerning a guardian spirit of the marshes records that ‘Whan tha year wor geyan wet, and tha watter rose i’ tha marshes, while it creepit up to the door-sill, an’ covered tha pads, come tha fust New Moon’; M. C. Balfour, ‘Legends of the Cars’, *Folklore* 2 (1891), 145–70 at 151.

32 See *OED* s.v. ‘wan’, a. The remaining instances in *Beowulf* are se wonna hrefn ‘the dark raven’ (3024) and the flame that will grow wonna on the hero’s pyre (3115). With wanian ‘to wane’ (with long root vowel), compare also wannian ‘to become dark’ (with short root vowel), though the latter is not found in *Beowulf*. 
the moon’s gradual diminution, given the homophony and context, it may hint at the lunar wane and perhaps at the moon’s ‘want, lack’ (*wana*) of light. Grendel is introduced as a *wonsæli wer* ‘unfortunate man’ (105), a descendant of Cain after the murder of Abel, his nocturnal predations were the *wonsceaft wera* ‘misery of men’ (120); he scorned to use weapons out of *wonhydum* ‘recklessness’ (434); he was among the creatures of the night who advanced *wan under wolcnum* ‘dark under clouds’ (651); he *com on wanre niht* ‘came in the dark night’ (702); and a wave ascended from his mere *won to wolcnum* ‘dark to the clouds’ (1374).

Grendel also had the ability to *wanian* ‘wane’, at least in the transitive sense of diminishing the inhabitants of Heorot and, implicitly therewith, that hall’s light and happiness—as does the dark moon to the sun during a solar eclipse. The verb *wanian* appears three times in *Beowulf*. In the first instance, Hroðgar laments to Beowulf:

> ‘Sorh is me to secganne on sefan minum
> gumena ængum hweat me Grendel hafað
> hyndø on Heorote mid his betepancum,
> faermiða gefremed; is min fletwerod,
> wigeheap gewanod.’ (473–7)

> ‘It is a sorrow to me in my heart to say to any man what humiliation Grendel has inflicted on me in Heorot with his hateful thoughts, (what) sudden/terrible attacks [with a pun on ‘dark moons/moon-darknesses(?)] ; my hall-troop, (my) battle-heap is waned.’

---

33 BT s.v. *wanian* II intrans. (I a); *OED* s.v. ‘wane’ v.
34 *OED* does not, however, attest the noun ‘wane’ (from OE *wana/wona*) in connection with the moon until the mid-sixteenth century.
36 The noun *wonsceaft* might be interpreted literally as ‘dark shaft’ or ‘dark creation’. As the context relates to warriors sleeping in Heorot, unaware of Grendel’s approach, the former possibility anticipates Hroðgar’s reflection on the attack of a demon with a *stræl* ‘arrow, shaft’ when the guardian of the soul sleeps (1741–7). As such, Grendel’s dark (lunar?) shaft may contrast with the radiant solar staves which destroy monsters such as the dwarf Alviss and the giantess Hrímgerðr in Old Norse texts (see Chapter 13).
37 See below.
38 See also my discussion of the link between ON *nið* ‘dark moon’ and humiliation below.
The postponement of *gewanod* ‘waned’ in this passage gives it emphasis. Later, Hroðgar similarly recalls that Grendel to *lange leode mine / wanode ond wyrde* ‘for too long waned and destroyed my people’ (1336–7). The third instance of *wanian* we have already seen describing the melting of the giant-sword (1607), and I shall return to it in Chapter 16. These uses of the verb may reflect a lunar aspect to Grendel and his mother, who, I believe, sought to diminish the sun’s light.

Grendel’s association with *wan* may also inform puns. It may be no coincidence that in persecuting Heorot and its inhabitants he *wið rihte wan* ‘fought against right’ (144), or that he *wan / hwile wið Hroðgar* ‘fought for a time against Hroðgar’ (151–2). In both cases *wan* is obviously the past tense of *winnan* ‘to fight’, but may pun on the adjective *wan* ‘dark’. Also, when held fast by the arm in Beowulf’s grip, Grendel is heard *sar wanigean* ‘bewailing (his) pain/wound’ (787). Here the verb *wani(ge)an* (with long root vowel) may pun on *wanian* ‘to wane, diminish’ (with short root vowel). Of course, ‘the pain/wound diminishing’ is precisely the opposite of what is actually happening in a direct, physical sense, but we may also detect a subtle anticipation of Grendel’s dismemberment as an image of the lunar wane, of the moon’s ‘dying’ (see later in this chapter). 39 This suggestion is encouraged by Beowulf’s likely description of how *hyne sar hafað / in niðgripe nearwe befongen* ‘the pain/wound has him [i.e., Grendel] narrowly/darkly(?) encompassed in a hostile/dark-moon(?) grip’ (975–6; again, see below). If there is a hint of Grendel’s ‘waning’ as he loses his arm, his ‘un/bad-sword’?, then we may have an implicit parallel to the subsequent loss by ‘waning’ of the blade of the giant sword which serves as an extension of Beowulf’s sword-arm.

Were Beowulf to contain more direct lexical references to the moon’s waning or dark phases, the proposed association of Grendel (and, we shall find, his mother and the climactic dragon) with the waning or dark moon would be strengthened. This may indeed be the case, as I have just indicated in the queried translations of *færniða* as ‘sudden/terrible dark

---

39 Note the recurrence of *sar* ‘wound, pain’ in line 975 in connection with Grendel’s arm-loss. According to a homily by Ælfric on the passion of Simon and Jude, the apostles commanded devils inhabiting idols of the sun and moon to come out and break those idols and the associated chariots. At once, two black Ethiopians emerged from the idols (presumably one from each), broke them to pieces and *mid wanunge aweg flugon* ‘and with waning flew away’; Thorpe, *Homilies*, II, 496–7.
moons/moon-darknesses(?)’ and niðgripe as ‘dark-moon(?) grip’. As we saw earlier in this study, Old Norse has a specific word for the waning or dark moon: nið. This noun is attested both as a simplex and as the first element of compounds, including mythical personal names and toponyms. It may well be related to the Old Norse adverb niðr ‘down’, ‘beneath’ and OE niðer.\textsuperscript{40} Since the darkness of night ensues when the sun passes below the horizon, it was perhaps thought that when the moon was apparently absent from the sky on a cloudless night, it too was beneath the ground. Before examining the possible evidence for a cognate OE nið ‘waning/dark moon’ in \textit{Beowulf}, I shall substantiate the belief that the waned moon was indeed ‘down’, ‘beneath’ (and dead) by reference to two (admittedly very late) texts. In the first, the dark, dead, dissected moon resides in the Underworld. In the second, which displays some remarkable similarities to \textit{Beowulf}, the dark, dead moon is drawn by monsters deep into a boggy pool.

\textbf{Grimm Brothers’ Fairy Tale 175: Der Mond ‘The Moon’}

This story tells how, in ancient days, four young men from a land of darkness travelled to a land where the glowing moon stood on an oak tree.\textsuperscript{41} Having pulled the moon down on a rope, they covered it with a cloth and took it away in a horse-drawn waggon. They set it up on an oak tree in their own land, to the delight of the local people and of dwarves and elves. The young men oiled the moon and tended to its ‘wick’, but one by one they aged and died. After each passed away, a quarter of the moon was cut off and buried with the deceased, until nothing was left of it and the old darkness returned.

But down in \textit{der Unterwelt ‘the Underworld’}, the four quarters of moon were reassembled, to the delight of the dead. They made merry, danced and went to taverns, where they got drunk and fought to the extent that the noise reached heaven. St. Peter, fearing that the Devil and his followers were about to storm Heaven, called the heavenly host to

\textsuperscript{40} Sturtevant, ‘Irregularities’, 85 identifies ON nið ‘the waning moon’ as probably a substantivized form of ‘an adjective *niðr “down” (cf. the adverb niðr).’ Note also EDD s.v. nithered ‘withered, wasted, feeble’.

arms. But in the end, as no revolt came, he rode to the Underworld alone, quieted the dead, took the moon away and hung it back up in the sky.

_The Dead Moon, a Blickling Homily and Beowulf_

Evidence for such a belief also survives in a highly evocative Lincolnshire folk-tale, _The Dead Moon_. Although not recorded until the nineteenth century, it merits detailed attention because it may well reflect earlier traditions about the submergence of the moon, not just below the horizon, but specifically in a marsh. As may not have been noticed before, there is even reason to detect a distant kinship between this tale and _Beowulf_.

In contrast to most of the stories examined in this book, _The Dead Moon_ characterizes the moon as wholly benevolent. It starts by recording how her light enabled people to traverse ‘bog-pads’ safely. Sometimes, however, she failed to shine and then:

> oot cam’ a tha Things ‘at dool I’ tha Darkness, an’ want aboot seekin’ to do evil an’ harm to all as worna safe beside ther ain he’arths. Harm an’ mischance an’ mischief: Bogles, an’ de’ad Things, an’ crawlin’ Horrors: tha a’ coomed oot o’ noights when the moon didna shine.  

The kindly Moon went to see for herself what went on behind her back. At the end of the month, she donned ‘a black cloak, an’ a black hood o’wer her yaller shinin’ hair’, and went to the edge of the bog. Looking about her she saw ‘watter here, an’ watter there’, and ‘wavin’ tussocks, an’ trem’lin’ mools, an’ gra’at black snags [i.e., bog-blackened tree-trunks or branches] a’ twisted and bent.’

Nevertheless, on she went into the middle of the marsh. There ‘witches girdn as tha rode past on ther gra’at black cats; an’ tha evil Eye glowered fro’ tha da’arkest corners—an’ tha will-o’-tha-wykes danced a’ aboot wi’ther lanterns swingin’ o’ ther backs.’ Dead folk rose in the

---


water with ‘hell fire i’ ther empty een-holes’ and ‘tha slimy driippin’
De’ad Han’s slithered aboot, beckonin’ an’ p’intin’’. Undeterred, the
Moon pressed on between ‘greedy gurglin’ watter ho’als’ until she came
‘nigh a big black pool’. There she slipped and would have tumbled into
the water, had she not ‘grabbed wi’ bo’oth han’s at a snag near by, to
steady ‘asel’ wi’; but so cum as she touched it, a twined itsel’ round her
wrists loike a pa’ir o’ han’cuffs, an’ gript her so ‘s she culdna move.’
And there she stayed, a prisoner of ‘the Black Snag’, with no help in
sight—only ‘shiftin’ flurrryin’ evil Things, comin’ an’ goin’ here an’ there
busy wi’ ther ain ill wark.’

Then the Moon heard a man calling pitifully to God and Mary
for help. He had strayed into the bog and was similarly snatching at
branches in a desperate bid to escape. But the bog-creatures mocked
and grasped at him as the ‘fause lights’ of ‘will o’ tha wykes’ led him
further astray. The bog-horrors that attacked him took ‘a’ sorts o’
shapes’, such as bright-eyed girls who stretched out helping hands,
which, when grasped, turned into ‘slimy things an’ shapeless worms’.
They whispered to him his life’s evil deeds and thoughts, shouted out
his heart’s secrets, and danced as they scorned him.

The Moon was alarmed when she saw the man approaching ‘tha
deadly quicks’. Although she could not free herself, in her struggle
her black hood fell back, so that her shining yellow hair fell to the
waters below. Its light drove away the darkness and enabled the man
to find his way out of the bog. The Moon wanted to go with him, but
as frantically as she struggled, she could not free herself. Exhausted,
she lay down, and despite her best efforts, her hood covered her head
again. The darkness returned and this time the bog-monsters came for
her. They mocked and snatched at her, and argued about whether to
poison, strangle, smother or bury her, until dawn approached. Then
they caught hold of her and ‘laid her deep i’ tha watter at fut o’ tha
snag’, with a ‘stra’ange big sto’an’ on top of her to prevent her from
rising. They meant to return that night to have their way with her,
so they also appointed two ‘will o’ tha wykes’ to watch over her till

then. And ‘thur lay tha poor moon, de’ad an’ buried i’ tha bog’, until someone would free her.

Days passed and the time came for the moon to reappear. But she did not. The nights ‘wor aye da’ark, an’ th’ Evil Things wor badder nor iver’. No one could travel safely and the bog-monsters even ‘crept an’ wailed roon’ tha hooses an’ keekit in at the winders, an’ sneepit at tha latches, till tha poor bodies mun ke’p lights a’ night, else tha horrors ’d a coomed ower tha varry doorsils’.

Many of the scared people went to ‘the wise woman wha doolt i’ th’ owd mill, an’ axed ef so be ’s tha could fin’ oot wheer tha moon wor ga’an’. She consulted her ‘brewpot’, her mirror and the Bible, but said she could not tell where the Moon was at present. She urged them to tell her if they heard anything more, however. More days passed, until one day at the local inn the man whom the Moon had rescued from the bog recalled his adventure. They told the wise woman of the mill. Again, she said it was too dark for her to tell, but instructed them how to find out for themselves what had happened to the Moon:

‘Go’a all on ye, just afwore the night gathers, pit a sto’on i’ yer gobs, an’ tak’ a hazel twig i’ yer han’s, an’ say ne’er a word till yer safe ho’am age’an. Than wa’alk on an’ fear nowt, fair into tha mid’ o’ tha ma’ash, till ye fin’ a coffin, a can’le, an’ a cross. Than ye ’ll no be far frae yer moon; look, and mappen ye ’ll fin’.’

They set out the next night for the middle of the bog as she had instructed. On they went until they stopped, amazed:

fur theer wor tha gra’at sto’an, half in, half oot, o’ tha watter, fur a’ th’ warl’ loike a stra’ange big coffin; an’ at tha he’ad wor tha black snag, stretchin’ oot’s twae arms in a dark grewsome cross; an’ on it a tiddy light flickered, like a deein’ can’le. An’ tha a’ knelt down i’ tha muck, an’ crossed thersel’s, an’ said, “Our Lord”, fu’st for’ard ’cause o’ tha cross, an’ then back’ard, to ke’p off tha Bogles; but wi’oot sp’akin’ out, fur tha kenned as tha Evil Things ’d catch ’em, ef tha didna do as tha wise woman tellt ’em.

54 Balfour, ‘Legends’, 162.
The people removed the stone and afterwards said that:

fur wan tiddy minute, tha seed a stra’ange an’ beautiful fa’ace lookin’ oop at
‘em glad loike oot o’ tha black watter; but tha light coomed so quick ‘an so
white an’ shinin’, ‘at tha stept ba’ack mazed wi’ it, an’ wi’ tha gre’at angry
wail as coomed fro’ tha fleein’ Horrors; an’ tha varry nex’ minute, when they
could see age’an, theer wor tha full moon i’ tha sky, bright an’ beautiful an’
kin’ s ‘iver, shinin’ an’ smilin’ doun at ‘em, an’ makin’ tha bogs an’ tha pads
as clear as da’ay, an’ stealin’ into tha vary corners, as thoff she’d ha’ druv tha
darkness an’ tha Bogles clean awa’ay ef a could.57

And ever since ‘tha moon shines brighter ’n clearer ower tha Bogs than
ither wheers’.58

Several peculiar aspects of this story find parallel almost a millennium
earlier in a description of Hell contained in a collection of Anglo-Saxon
homilies dated 971. The portrayal of Hell in Blickling Homily 16 (17),
which is inspired by that of the third-century Visio Sancti Pauli ‘Vision of
St. Paul’,59 records that:

Swa Sanctus Paulus wæs geseonde on norðanweardne þisne middangeard,
þær ealle wætero niðergewitað, & he þær geseah ofer ðæm wætere sumne
harne stan; & wæron norð of ðæm stane awexene swiðe hrimige bearwas,
& ðær wæron þystro-genipo, & under þæm stane wæs niccra eardung &
wearga. & he geseah þæt on ðæm clife hangodan on ðæm is gean bearwum
manige swearte saula be heora handum gebundne; & þa fynd þara on nicra
onlicnesse heora gripende wæron, swa swa graëdig wulf; & þæt wæter wæs
sweart under þæm clife neoðan. & betuh þæm clife on [better ond] ðæm wætre
wæron swylce twelf mila, & ðonne ða twigo forburston þonne gewitan þa
saula niðer þa þe on ðæm twigum hangodan, & him onfengon ða nicras. Dis
ðonne wæron ða saula þa þe her on worlde mid unrihte gefyrenode wæron,
& ðæs noldan geswican ær heora lifes ende.60

So Saint Paul was looking to the northern part of this world, where all waters
go down, and he saw there over the water a certain hoar-stone; and north
of that stone had grown very rimy woods, and there were dark mists, and

---

59 A fragmentary Old English translation of this text also survives; see A. di Paolo
Healey (ed.), The Old English Vision of St. Paul (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978),
with remarks on Beowulf and the Blickling homily on p. 52.
60 Morris, Blickling Homilies, 209, 211 (with my suggested emendation in brackets).
under that stone was a dwelling-place of water-monsters and \textit{weargas}. And he saw that on that cliff, in the icy woods, there hung many black souls, bound by their hands; and the enemies/fiends of them were gripping (them) in the likeness of water-monsters, like a greedy wolf; and the water was black underneath that cliff. And between that cliff in [better ‘and’] the water there were, as it were, twelve miles, and when the twigs broke, then the souls went down which hung on the twigs, and the water-monsters received them. These, then, were the souls of those who here in the world sinned with injustice and would not desist from it before their life’s end.

There are obviously many differences, big and small, between the folk-tale and this passage, which is essentially a tableau, not a narrative. Most obvious is the prime importance of the Moon in the folk-tale, compared with the moon’s absence from the homily,\textsuperscript{61} which therefore lacks anything to parallel the Moon’s rescue of the man and the locals’ rescue of her. There is also the contrast between the splendidly evoked bog of the folk-tale and the setting of the homily, although in the latter a bog may be implicit in the black water beneath the cliff. Nevertheless, the differences do not obscure a kernel of three peculiar and most specific similarities:

(a) As, in the folk-tale, the dark Moon, which is to say the \textit{black} Moon, is bound by her hands to a tree overhanging black water (as might also have happened to the sinful man, had the Moon not intervened), so, in the homily, the black souls are bound by their hands to twigs of trees overhanging black water.

(b) As, in the folk-tale, the Moon and the sinful man are assailed from below by grasping water-devils in various forms, so, in the homily, souls are attacked from below by gripping fiends in the likeness of water-monsters. Furthermore, that OE \textit{nicor} ‘water-monster’ came to mean ‘siren’ or ‘mermaid’ in Middle English encourages identification of the homily’s monsters with the folk-tale’s ‘bright-eyed girls’.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61} Note, however, the teaching (noted earlier in this chapter) of an earlier homily in the same collection: \textit{ponne se mona wanað, ponne tacað he ure deaplicnesse} ‘When the moon wanes, then it betokens our mortality’; Morris, \textit{Blickling Homilies}, 17.

\textsuperscript{62} See \textit{OED s.v. nicker}; \textit{MED s.v. niker}. 
(c) As, in the folk tale, the Moon is buried beneath a big strange stone, so, in the homily, the black souls end up in water beneath a certain hoar-stone.63

What makes these correspondences still more interesting is that, as has long been realized, the homily’s description of St. Paul’s vision of Hell displays strong verbal similarities to Hroðgar’s description of Grendel’s mere and its environs in *Beowulf* (1357–9, 1408–17).64 The nature of the relationship between these Old English texts is uncertain; it has been variously argued that the homily was influenced by *Beowulf*, that the opposite is true, and, thirdly, that the similarities reflect shared use of a common vernacular source (now lost).65 Although their precise relationship cannot be ascertained, a close connection between these two texts seems undeniable. The folk-tale, which, to my knowledge, has not been mentioned before in this connection, apparently also stands in some (chronologically distant) relationship to these texts, though it cannot be directly reliant on either. Even if the exact nature of its relationship to the Old English texts also remains undefinable, it seems similarly clear that there is one.

One thing we can discern more clearly is that the folk-tale shares certain similarities with *Beowulf* that are lacking in the homily (while the moon is a force for good in the folk tale, if present in *Beowulf* it constitutes a force for ill). Most obviously, the Lincolnshire bog meets its evocative match in the Danish fen with its dark, sucking water, perilous passage and ‘fire on/in the flood’, which is interpretable on one level as an apocalyptic sign, but also more humbly as a will-o’-the-wisp (or as the folk-tale has it, a ‘will-o’-tha-wyke’). Furthermore, in both texts a heavenly light is concealed and then revealed in bog-water: in the folk-tale the dark moon, after her symbolic death, shines like the sun ‘as clear as da’ay’; in *Beowulf*, the death of Grendel’s mother immediately results in a revelation of sun-like light. In both texts, evil creatures from a bog harass nearby people on dark nights, even approaching their homes.

---

65 See Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 158.
Less clear is the possible correspondence of candles, cross and twigs in the folk-tale to the intimated combination (if my interpretation is correct) of candle, Cross and twig-swords in *Beowulf*.\(^{66}\) Such similarities invite investigation of whether the folk-tale’s focus on the dark moon finds parallel in the homily and, more importantly, in *Beowulf*.

As noted earlier, there is no trace of the moon in the homily. But there could conceivably have been other, related sources that featured a dark moon, having taken their cue from the *Visio*’s location of Hell beyond ‘the setting of the sun’, where ‘there was no light … but darkness and sorrow and sadness’.\(^{67}\)

The folk-tale’s similarities to *Beowulf* encourage the following examination of the possible presence of an Old English noun *nið* meaning ‘waning/dark (phase of the) moon’ in the Anglo-Saxon poem.

**Nið ‘Waning/Dark Moon’(?) in *Beowulf*\(^{68}\)**

Dictionaries of Old English adduce no word clearly corresponding to ON *nið* in the sense ‘waning/dark moon’.\(^{68}\) Even so, a cognate OE *nið* (also with short ‘i’) might be present, or sometimes alluded to through wordplay, in *Beowulf* both as a simplex and as the first element of compounds. It is currently explained as a noun (with long ‘i’) meaning chiefly ‘hostility’, ‘affliction’, ‘violence’ or ‘battle’. Assuming an early date for *Beowulf*, however, the ostensible absence of an OE *nið* ‘waning/dark moon’ from other Old English sources might simply indicate that, as an uncommon word, it was never subsequently recorded, or that it fell out of use fairly early.

I start with the compounds in *Beowulf* which have *niþ* as their first element, as these supply much of the more promising evidence. Candidates for the inclusion of putative OE *nið* ‘waning/dark moon’

---

\(^{66}\) On Hrunting and the giant sword as twig-swords, see Chapter 16. On the use of hazel rods to ward off ghosts, revenants and evil in Scandinavian tradition, see H. Baklid, ‘Hazel Rods in Graves’, *Arv* 73 (2017), 7–26. Perhaps also compare the folk-tale’s wise old woman of the mill, whose instructions enable the people to rescue the Moon from her stone coffin, with *Svipdagsmál*’s Sinmara, guardian of the chest containing the twig-sword Lævateinn beneath a ‘milling’ maelstrom.


\(^{68}\) It is uncertain whether, in the Old English poem *Christ and Satan* (ASPR, 632), *nið* (with short vowel) means ‘place low down, pit’ and is cognate with ON *nið* ‘dark of moon’, as AEW s.v. *nið* proposes; this instance might instead be *niþ* (with long vowel), meaning ‘hostility, torment’. At the time of writing, DOE has yet to reach the letter ‘n’.
include the following (in alphabetical order, with their current, standard interpretations):69

(a) *niðdraca* (2273), ‘hostile or malicious dragon’
(b) *niðgæst* (2699), ‘malicious (stranger or) foe’
(c) *niþgeweorc* (683), ‘hostile deed, fight’
(d) *niþgrim(m)* (193), ‘grim, cruel’
(e) *niðgripe* (976), ‘malicious grip’
(f) *niðheard* (2417), ‘brave in battle’
(g) *niðhedig* (3165), ‘hostile’
(h) *niðsele* (1513), ‘hostile or battle hall’
(i) *niðwundor* (1365), ‘dreadful wonder’

Since in all these compounds the ‘i’ in the first syllable is followed by two or more consonants, it cannot be determined on metrical grounds whether it is long or short. An OE *nið* ‘waning/dark moon’ (with short ‘i’) may therefore be entertained in these cases, if that sense suits the immediate context. Let us examine each in turn:

(a) Hordwynne fond
   eald uhtsceaða opene standan,
   se ðe byrnende biorgas seceð,
   nacod niðdraca, nihtes fleogeð
   fyre befangen. (2270–74)

   The old, before-dawn ravager found the hoard-joy [i.e., hoard] standing open, he who burning seeks barrows, the naked *nið*-dragon, (which) flies by night enveloped by fire.

Here *nið*- alliterates with *nihtes* ‘by night’70 and describes a fiery dragon which attacks before dawn.71 Shortly earlier, we learnt that this dragon,

---

69 The following list gives the definitions found in the glossary to KB. In all cases KB identifies *nið(-)* as having a long ‘i’.
70 In addition to the further instances, identified below, of *nið* alliterating with *niht* ‘night’ in Beowulf, note *nihta* … *Nið* in Genesis A (ASPR, 1383); *niht* … *niða* in Judith (34); *niðhetum, nihtlangne* in Andreas (834). Cf. also *niðda* … *niðtrin* in Guðlac B (1097); *mona* … *nihtes* … *niher* in Christ (937–8).
71 Prior studies of this dragon, which do not raise the possibility of a link to the moon, include A. E. DuBois, ‘The Dragon in Beowulf’, *PMLA* 72 (1957), 819–22; Brown,
The Waning Sword

which on account of its chthonic den is also an eorðdraca ‘earth-dragon’ (2712, 2825), ruled deorcum nihtum ‘in dark nights’ (2211), rather as Grendel had in Heorot. 72 This candidate for OE nið ‘waning/dark moon’ is the most persuasive, given the comparable reference in Volsupá 66 to inn dimmi dreki ‘the dim/dark dragon’ Niðhöggr ‘Dark-Moon Striker’, 73 which flies up Niðafjöllum ‘from Niði’s ['Dark-Moon’s', i.e., a dwarf’s]/Dark-Moons’ Mountains’. 74 Since the niðdraca lies on rusty treasure, however, another, albeit probably slender, possibility is that it is a ‘rust-dragon’, if nið- is related rather to Gothic nidwa ‘rust’. 75

(b) þæt he þone niðgæst niodor hwene sloh (2699)

so that he struck the nið-guest/visitor/creature a little further down.

Again, nið- describes the dragon. We may note the alliteration of, and wordplay between, nið- and niodor ‘further down’; compare neðan frá Niðafjöllum … Niðhöggr ‘from beneath from Niðafjöll … Niðhöggr’

---

72 On the representation in mythology of the dark moon as a sun-eclipsing dragon that rises from the earth, see E. G. Suhr, ‘The Horned Moses’, Folklore 74 (1963), 387–95 at 391–3; Suhr, ‘Interpretation’.

73 Perhaps secondarily Niðhöggr ‘Hostile Striker’. The name is also found alliterating with náinn ‘corpse-like one’ (or ‘near kinsman’) and niðr ‘descendant’ in PTP, 931–2.

74 For the dwarf Niði (from nið ‘waning/dark moon’), see Chapter 13. The dragon’s darkness (or dimness) and place of origin favour the first interpretation of its name: ‘Waning/Dark-Moon Striker’.Earlier, in Volsupá 38–9, Niðhöggr is located sólu fjarrri ‘far from the sun’ in a hellish hall called Náströnd ‘Corpse-Shore’. Snakes entwined this hall, drops of venom fell in through its roof-vent (cf. Chapter 16 on the Bedale pommel), and heavy currents assailed deceased criminals inside. There Niðhöggr sucked the bodies of the dead and a vargr ‘wolf/criminal’—not necessarily distinct from Niðhöggr, given the composite wolf-snake on the Gosforth Cross—tore men to pieces. Cf. Grendel and his mother as wolfish, criminal, man-eating inhabitants of a hall beneath a dark, snake-infested, turbulent, hellish mere, on whose shore the head of Æschere was found. Note also Gylfaginning’s location of Niðhöggr in a spring in Niflheimr ‘Mist-Home’ called Hvergelmir ‘Cauldron Roarer(?)’ (SnaEGylf, 9, 53), which according to Grimnismál 26 is filled with drips from the horns of the hart Eikþyrnir which stands on Óðinn’s hall. Cf. the horned hart that would not hide its head in Grendel’s mist-enveloped, turbulent mere near Heorot (Beowulf 1368–72).

75 A connection between Gothic nidwa ‘rust’ and ON nið- in Volsupá 50’s niðför ‘rust-pale(?)’ is made by Falk, ‘Oldnorske ordforklaringer’, 111 without reference to the dragon of Beowulf. The etymology of nidwa is disputed, however; see W. P. Lehmann, A Gothic Etymological Dictionary (Leiden, 1986), 266.
in Völuspá 66. OE *niðgæst*, or a very similar word, also appears in the Old English poem *Guthlac A* (*niðgista/nyðgista*, 540), where it describes tormenting demons of the wilderness (like Grendel).

(c) ‘Nat he þara goda þæt he me ongean slea, rand geheawe, þeah þe he rof sie niþgeweorca; ac wit on niht sculon sece ofersittan …’ (681–4)

‘He does not know of those good (skills) with which he might strike against me, hew the shield, although he may be brave in *niþ*-deeds; but we two shall by night forgo the sword …’

Here *niþ*- describes Grendel’s deeds. It again alliterates with *niht* ‘night’.

(d) *nydwracu niþgrim, nihtbealwa mæst* (193)

violent-persecution *niþ*-grim, greatest of night-attacks

Similarly, *niþ-* here describes Grendel’s attacks and alliterates with *niht*-. There is wordplay between *niþ-* and *nyd-* ‘necessity, violence’. OE *niþgrim* recurs in the *Paris Psalter* (54:12) where the speaker says that *me beþeahton þeostru niþgrim* ‘*niþ*-grim darknesses covered me’ — observe the association with darkness.

(e) ‘ … ac hyne sar hafað in *niðgripe* nearlyw befonen’ (975–6)

‘but pain has him [i.e., Grendel] in a *nið*-grip, narrowly/darkly(?) 76 encompassed’

This instance is uncertain, as *nið-* in *niðgripe* is an emendation of the manuscript reading *mid* which assumes two scribal errors, albeit simple ones. Assuming the emendation is correct, *nið-* is again associated with Grendel, this time as he lies mortally wounded at the bottom of the mere, in his *nið*-hall (h).

(f) *Gesæt ða on næsse niðheard cyning* (2417)

Then the *nið*-hard king sat on the headland

76 For the possible connotation ‘darkly’, see n. 64 below.
Here *nið-* describes Beowulf before he fights the *nið*-dragon. OE *niðheard* also appears in the Old English poem *Judith* (277), which follows *Beowulf* in the manuscript, with the meaning ‘bold’, ‘daring’.

(g) *niðhedige men* genumen hæfdon (3165)

*nið*-minded men had taken

These words concern men who had taken treasure from the *nið*-dragon’s den. *KB* defines the unique compound *niðhedige* as ‘hostile’, but it is not clear why these presumably mournful men should be so described. It would seem more likely that they were thinking (-hedig- derives from *hycgan* ‘to think’) of the dragon’s hostility (*nið* with long ‘i’) or, more immediately, of the darkness (*nið* with short ‘i’) within the dragon’s den.

(h) *Da se eorl ongeat*

Then the nobleman perceived that he was in a certain *nið*-hall.

Here *nið-* describes the ‘hall’ at the bottom of the mere in which Beowulf finds himself during his fight with Grendel’s mother. This hall is implicitly the inverse of Heorot, the gold-hall which illuminated lands like the sun. As such, it may be a ‘dark-moon hall’.

(i) ‘*Þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,*

‘There each night a *nið*-wonder can be seen, fire on [or ‘in’] the flood.’

Here *nið-* describes the weird nocturnal fire on, or in, Grendel’s mere. Again, the word’s alliterative partner is *niht*. The fire finds likely parallel in the dark, discerning flicker-flame around the home of Gerðr, who, if my interpretation is correct, is a lunar giantess who has appropriated sunlight.

Moving on to the fifteen instances of *nið* as a simplex in *Beowulf*, we find no clear instances of a sense ‘waning/dark moon’. However,

---

77 Nor do I find any clear instances elsewhere in Old English texts, though the instance of *nið* in *The Fight at Finnsburg* (quoted below) catches the eye. Notably, perhaps,
a connection with *niht* remains apparent, even if only one instance alliterates structurally with this word. Also clear is an association with the poem’s nocturnal monsters.

OE *nið* (again with short or long *‘i’*) is implicitly paired, through apposition, with *niht* in Beowulf’s description of how Grendel:

(j) ‘deorcum nihtum
eawēð þurh egsan uncuône nið.’ (275–6)

‘on dark nights reveals through terror unknown [i.e., unheard of] nið.’

Similarly, we find *nið* (with short or long *‘i’*) juxtaposed with *niht* and associated with the hostility of monsters, including Grendel, when Beowulf declares:

(k) ‘yðde eotena cyn ond on yðum slog
nícera nihtes, nearþpearfe dreah,
wræc Wedera nið —wean ahsodon—
forgrand gramum, ond nu wið Grendel sceal …’ (421–4)

‘I destroyed the race of giants and in the waves slew water-monsters by night, endured narrow/dark-necessity [i.e., dire straits], avenged the *nið* of the *Wederas* ‘We(a)ther-(Geat)s’—they had sought woe—ground angry ones to pieces, and now against Grendel I shall …’

After Beowulf had torn off Grendel’s arm, the monster fled, the *dogera dægrim* ‘day-count of his days’ (823) having ended. Beowulf had cleansed Hroðgar’s hall:

(l) genered wið niðe. Nihtweorce gefeh (827)

saved it from *nið*. He rejoiced in his night-work.

---

Here the ‘i’ in *nið* could be either short (with its syllable and the following unstressed syllable being metrically ‘resolved’) or long. The word alliterates with *niht* and is associated with Grendel.

Next we see *nið* (with short or long ‘i’) alliterating with a type of aquatic monster and linked to Grendel when, once morning had come, the Danes saw that their foe had departed:

(m) niða ofercumen, on nicera mere (845)

overcome by niðas ['by force?'], into the mere of water-monsters

A much later passage during the episode of the *nið*-dragon implicitly associates Grendel and his mother with *nið* (with short or long ‘i’):

(n) forðon he ær fela,
nearo neðende, niða gedigde,
hildehlemma, syððan he Hroðgares,
sigoreadig secg, sele fælsode
ond æt guðe forgrap Grendeles mægum
laðan cynnes. (2349–54)

because he [Beowulf] had earlier, braving narrowness/darkness(?) [i.e., dire straits], survived many *niðas*, battle-crashes, when he, a victory-eager man, cleansed Hroðgar’s hall and in battle gripped to death Grendel’s kin, of loathsome kind.

The poet also associates the simplex *nið* with the *nið*-dragon. When it spewed fire:

(o) Wæs þæs wyrmes wig wide gesyne,
nearoæges nið, nean ond feorran. (2316–7)

The worm’s warfare was widely seen, the narrow/dark(?)-hostile/shining/coloured one’s *nið*, near and far.

Here *nið* may have either a short or a long ‘i’. I return to this instance later in this chapter.

---

79 Similarly, *niða genæged* ‘laid low by *niðas* ['by force?']’ (1439), vis-à-vis one of the mere’s monstrous inhabitants.

80 Here we also see *nið* paired with *nearo* ‘narrow’/?dark(?), a combination seen earlier in (e) *niðgripe nearæw*, (k) *nearopearfe* … *nið* and (n) *nearo* … *niða* (it recurs in other Old
When Beowulf’s sword failed against the bone of the *nið*-dragon, the weapon was:

(p) nacod æt niðe (2585)

naked in the *nið*

Here *nið* must have a long ‘i’; a connection with *nið*- (potentially with short ‘i’) in *niðdraca* seems inescapable.

And when Beowulf shattered the sword against the dragon’s head, the weapon was:

(q) niþe genyded (2680)

compelled by *niþ*

Here *nið* may have either a long or a short ‘i’. The phrase may refer to the force of Beowulf’s stroke (‘compelled by violence’), or to the reason for the sword’s shattering, or to both. I favour a case of deliberate ambiguity.81 Again, a nod to the first element of *niðdraca* seems likely.

The fourteen uses of OE *nið* as the second element of compounds in *Beowulf* do not offer strong support for the present thesis.82 But nor do they fatally undermine it, and they may offer some support. Five instances might hint at the dark moon or associated darkness: *bealonið* (2404), referring to the ‘dire affliction’ inflicted by the *nið*-dragon; *bealoniðe* ‘fierce rage’ (2714), denoting the action of the same dragon’s poison; *færniða* (476), which, we saw earlier, describes the ‘sudden attacks’ with which Grendel ‘waned’ the Danes of Heorot; *heteniðas* ‘enmities’ (152), similarly describing Grendel’s dark, nocturnal attacks; and *searoniðas* ‘battles’ (3067), in this case sought by Beowulf from the *nið*-dragon.

---

81 The punctuation in *KB* eliminates any ambiguity: *niþe genyded; Nægling forbaerst* ‘compelled by *niþ*; Nægling burst’. The likelihood of wordplay on *nið* in the dragon-episode is strengthened by the second of the poet’s two uses of another similar-sounding noun, *niþðas* ‘men’. The thief who entered the dark den of the *niðdraca* is *nið[ð]*a *nathwylc* ‘a certain one of men’ (2215). The manuscript reading *niða* admits a pun on ‘of ill intentions/afflictions’ and perhaps on ‘of waning/dark moons’ or ‘of waning/dark phases of the moon’.

82 The full list is: *bealonið, færnið, herenið, hetenið, inwitnið, searonið* and *wælnið*; some occur more than once in the poem. I am not aware of any Old Norse compounds that have *nið* ‘waning/dark moon’ in secondary position.
Viewed collectively, this evidence about (-)nið(-) is inconclusive, but not discouraging. As the first element of compounds especially, nið alliterates with niht ‘night’ on several occasions and is associated with the poem’s nocturnal monsters, including their deeds and homes. Its association with the niðdraca is especially interesting, given the parallel with Niðhöggr, an Old Norse dragon of (probably) the dark moon. Additionally, wordplay is evident, with a pun on nioðor probably also finding parallel in Old Norse (b). The repeated pairing of OE nið with niht suggests a meaningfully close connection between these words, a possibility that strengthens in light of instances of a corresponding pairing in Old Norse mythological Eddic poetry.

In Vafþrúðnismál Óðinn engages in a wisdom contest with the giant Vafþrúðnir. After learning where Máni ‘Moon’ and Sól ‘Sun’ came from (22–3), he asks the giant hvaðan Dagr um kom ... eða Nótt með niðum ‘whence Dagr ‘Day’ came ... or Nótt ‘Night’ with its niðum’ (24). Here niðum, dative plural of nið, means ‘waning/dark moons’ or ‘the moon’s waning and dark phases’, and it alliterates with Nótt (cognate with OE niht). In response, Vafþrúðnir identifies Dagr’s father, and Nótt’s, and adds that the gods made ný ok nið ‘new [i.e., waxing] moon(s) and waning/dark moon(s)’ as an ártal ‘year-tally’ for men (25).

ON nið may also alliterate with nótt in Vpluspá’s account of the heathen Creation. After mentioning the sun and moon, the poet records that the gods gave names nótt ok niðjum ‘to night and (its) niðjum’ (6). Here it is uncertain whether niðjum is the dative plural of niðr ‘kin’ or an alternative dative plural of nið ‘dark (phase of the) moon’. The ambiguity may be deliberate.

---

83 If the niðdraca is accepted as a dragon of the waning or dark moon, or as an allusion to such a creature, this does not preclude additional explanations of its nature in terms of other celestial phenomena, such as comets, meteors and meteorites, which could account for the fiery destruction it causes (see Brown, ‘Firedrake’, 447–54; Gráslund, Beowulfkvædet; OED s.v. ‘fire-drake’ 2a).

84 ON nið ‘waning/dark moon’ does not occur in any skaldic poem, according to PTP, 914. Other Old Norse terms for ‘waning (crescent) moon’ might be mulinn (or múlinn/mylinn/mylinn) and skarmr; see ibid., 912–3.

85 Cf. Machan, Vafþrúðnismál, 132; La Farge and Tucker, Glossary, s.v. niðar.

86 Cf. how, by ending Grendel’s dogera dægrim ‘day-count of days’, Beowulf saved the solar hall of Heorot from nið—the darkness of the dark moon? The Old Norse alliterative pairing ný ... nið recurs in a stanza listing terms for the moon in PTP, 912.

87 See La Farge and Tucker, Glossary, s.v. nið and niðr.

88 Cf. my remarks on Niðjungr in Chapter 13.
Finally, there may well be an association of OE *nið* with a waning moon outside *Beowulf* in *The Fight at Finnsburg*, a fragmentary poem about events also treated in the Finnsburg-episode of *Beowulf*:

> ‘Nu scyneð þes mona, wæðol under wolcnum; nu arisað weadæda ðe ðisne folces nið fremman willað.’ (7–9)

‘Now shines this moon, waning[?]/the waning moon(?) behind clouds; now woe-deeds arise which will advance this hostility [with a pun on ‘lunar wane’?] of the people.’

Here *waðol*, a word attested nowhere else in Old English, is often translated ‘wandering’ (compare OE *wað* ‘wandering’), sometimes in relation to the full moon. I suggest, however, that it is rather a predecessor of the obsolete English dialect noun ‘waddle’, which meant ‘wane of the moon’, and that it bears a corresponding sense; the woeful deeds, it seems to me, will be perpetrated in dim moonlight, under a waning, cloud-obscured crescent. If this interpretation is correct, the presence of the noun *nið* ‘hostility’ so shortly thereafter is suggestive of a pun on *nið* ‘lunar wane’ (metrically, the ‘i’ could be long or short).

Overall, there is reason to think that—especially as the first element of compounds associated with nocturnal monsters, their deeds and abodes—*nið* in *Beowulf* might not always mean ‘hostile’/’hostility’, ‘affliction’, ‘violence’ or ‘battle’ (and similar senses). It might sometimes denote the waning or dark moon, or the darkness associated therewith. Additionally, in some cases such a meaning may be a secondary connotation (occasionally along with ‘beneath’ and ‘low place’).

This proposal gains credibility from further comparative evidence suggesting that Grendel and his mother may be identified with the moon, especially in its waning and dark phases. I start by examining

---

89 *KB*, 283. Before identifying the moon, the speaker denies that the light in question is that of a flying *draca* ‘dragon’ (3).

90 See e.g., *KB*, 452; D. K. Fry (ed.), *Finnsburh Fragment and Episode* (London, 1974), 77, which notes that ‘MHG. *waadel* “wandering, erratic” is often cited, referring to full or new moon.’

91 *EDD* s.v. *waddle* sb.? (instance from Somerset dated 1678); *OED* s.v. *waddle*, n. 2: ‘The wane of the moon’ (with the comment ‘cf. OHG., MHG. *waadel*, MLG. *waadel* (=*waþlo-*) phases or change of the moon’). Cf. ON *vaðill* in the sword-name *Angrovaðill* mentioned later in this chapter.
Grendel’s eyes, especially in relation to those of his most famous Icelandic analogue, Glámr.

Grendel and Glámr, the Monster with Moonlit Eyes

Grendel had horribly gleaming eyes. After bursting through the door of Heorot, he stepped onto the floor and *him of eagum stod / ligge gelicost leoht unfæger* ‘from his eyes stood, most like flame, an unlovely light’ (726–7). This light is immediately suggestive of several things: Grendel’s burning inner rage, the fires of Hell and the nocturnal fire on, or in, his mere.

The similarity between Grendel’s mere and the Lake of the Moon in Wonders invites the suggestion that the mere’s fire was identified with moonlight, a possibility made more attractive by its introduction as a *niðwundor* ‘waning/dark-moon(?) wonder’ (1365). As the mere was set within fenland, another naturalistic explanation of this wondrous nocturnal fire is as *ignis fatuus*, a will-o’-the-wisp, the bluish hue of which (according to some reports) might be described as dark and its glow likened to or associated with moonlight. In *For Skírnis*, Skírnir’s

---

92 The mere-fire is also paralleled by the fiery, surging ‘burn’ that issues from, and prevents entry to, the dragon’s lair (2545–9); in later centuries at least, a ‘fire-drake’ was also a will-o’-the-wisp (OED s.v. ‘fire-drake’ 2b; Brown, ‘Firedrake’, 452). On the phenomenon of *ignis fatuus*, commonly deemed sinister, see W. W. Newell, ‘The Ignis Fatuus, Its Character and Legendary Origin’, JAF 17 (1904), 39–60; J. A Lindell, ‘The Ignis Erraticus’, https://web.archive.org/web/20090725120148/http://jeff.lindell.home.comcast.net/~jeff.lindell/Ignis%20Erraticus.html; D. Meredith, ‘Hazards in the Bog: Real and Imagined’, Geographical Review 92 (2002), 319–32 at 327–30, which includes an account of a will-o’-the-wisp whose ‘light filled the room with a chilly, moonlike glow’ (330). *Gull-bóris saga* describes a mysterious *haugaeldr* ‘grave-mound fire’ as shining as if *af tungli* ‘from the moon’ and flickering on top *blám loga* ‘with dark-blue flame’ (the moon may occasionally appear blue because of the presence of dust in the atmosphere); Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Harðar saga*, 183. That such a fire may be identifiable as, or closely related to, *ignis fatuus* is indicated by chapter 85 of *Egils saga*, which records the belief that at the end of his life the hero deposited his treasure in a deep marsh or in hot springs with large pits nearby, *því at þangat er optliga sénn haugaeldr* ‘because mound-fire is often seen there’; Sigurður Nordal, *Egils saga*, 297–8; Viðar Hreinsson, *Complete Sagas*, I, 176 translates *haugaeldr* as ‘will-o’-the-wisp’. Nocturnal grave-mound fire also marked the burial site of Tyrfingr; Tolkien, *Saga*, 13, 16. Additionally, that such a fire was indicative of hidden treasure is shown by an episode from chapter 18 of *Grettis saga*, one analogous to the mere-episode of *Beowulf*. It records that, late one evening, Grettir saw a great fire *gjósa upp* ‘gush up’ from a burial mound on a headland. He went there, broke in, fought and beheaded its undead inhabitant, Kárr, with the sword *fjokulsnautr* ‘Jökull’s [Icicle/s/Glacier’s] Gift/Booty’ (seemingly also known as *Ættartangi* ‘Family’s Tang’ in *Vatnsdœla saga*),
similar journey to the home of the (in my view) lunar Gerðr took him through a probably equivalent fire described as myrkvan ... visan vafrolga ‘dark, discerning flicker-flame’. The concept of dark, flickering fire might also reflect the sight of a corona around the dark moon as it eclipses the sun, albeit only during daytime. In a half-stanza attributed to Einarr Skúlason, the uneclipsed sun is described as a high vafroli ‘flicker-flame’, neither dark nor discerning.

References to other dark fires in Old English and Old Norse texts should also be noted. From the Old English poem Christ and Satan, for example, we learn that Satan was assailed in Hell by se wonna læg ‘the dark fire’ (ASPR, 714). And in Vafþrúðnmál 50–1 the fire of Ragnarǫk is surtalosi ‘dark flame’, which probably became conflated with the flame of Surtr, possessor of Sinmara in Svipdagsmál.

and left with treasure including a splendid sax ‘short sword’. This sax was an heirloom of the family of his host, Kárr’s son, to whom Grettir gave it, and who, in turn, gave it to Grettir. Since, in the same episode, Grettir speaks a skaldic verse mentioning the sword Hrott, comparable to Hrunting in Beowulf, it is tempting also to relate jökulsnautr to the giant sword which melts hildegicelum ‘with battle-icicles’, ON jökull and OE gicel ‘icicle’ being cognate (though there is no melting in the saga); it is especially intriguing that this sword should also be known as ‘Family’s Tang’ (pars pro toto ‘Family’s Hilt’), as that is what (in my view) the giant sword’s hilt is to Hroðgar. For the episode, see Guðni Jónsson, Grettis saga, 57–61. For thoughts on Jökulsnautr/Ættartangi, which might earlier have been taken from a giant thief, see Jones, Vatnsdœla saga’s Saga, 135; H. R. E. Davidson, ‘The Sword at the Wedding’, Folklore 71 (1960), 1–18 at 7–8; R. L. Harris, ‘The Proverbs of Vatnsdœla saga, the Sword of Jökull and the Fate of Grettir: Examining an Instance of Conscious Intertextuality in Grettis saga’, https://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/applic_Vatns-Grett-I.html. Jón Árnason, Íslenzkar þjóðsögur, I, 276 ff. records later Icelandic traditions that a mysterious, often dark blue, fire (sometimes called málmlogi ‘metal-flame’) marked the site of buried treasure.

Presumably related is the fire past or though which Svipdagr journeyed to Mengloð in Svipdagsmál, although its flame is not said to be dark. Another vafroli, also not identified as dark, surrounded Brynhildr’s stronghold, according to Finch, Saga of the Volsungs, 50; and for another instance of the word, see PTP, 922. It has been identified as a likely loan from Old English; cf. the Anglo-Saxon poem Daniel (241), which refers to wyrm þæs weofran liges ‘surging of the wavering fire’ within a hellish oven (241); see von See et al., Kommentar, Bd. 2, 80–2, which also comments further on the widespread ancient and medieval idea of the boundary fire.

PTP, 151–2.  
At least in some cases, the image probably derives from Patristic descriptions of Hell. For instances additional to those given below, and for discussion, see von See et al., Kommentar, Bd. 2, 82–3; Samplonius, ‘Background’, 121–5.  
See Samplonius, ‘Background’, 121–2. There may be a hint of apocalyptic dark fire at the end of Beowulf when Wiglaf, speaking about the hero’s cremation, declares: ‘Nu
The thought that the light emitted by Grendel’s eyes was moonlight, or at least associated therewith, occurred to the eminent Anglo-Saxon scholar J. R. R. Tolkien. Although he did not express this view in his academic writings, his posthumously published poem *The Lay of Beowulf* records that ‘Grendel came forth in the dead of night; the moon in his eyes shone glassy bright ... The moon gleamed in through the windows wan ... and a light in the demon’s eyes there shone’.

This interpretation of Grendel’s ocular radiance is encouraged by comparison with the climax to a well-known Old Norse parallel to Beowulf’s fight with Grendel, namely Grettir’s fight with an undead Swede called Glámr who, when alive, was *mikill vexti ok undarligr í yfirbragði, gráeygr* [v.l. *bláeygðr*] *ok opineygr, úlfsgrár á hárslit* ‘great in stature and wonderful in appearance, grey-eyed [v.l. black/dark-blue-eyed] and open/wide-eyed, wolf-grey in hair-colour’, and hostile to Christianity:

Tunglskin var mikit úti ok gluggapykn; hratt stundum fyrir, en stundum dró frá. Nú í því er Glámr fell, rak skýit frá tunglinu, en Glámr hvessti augun upp í móti, ok svá hefir Grettir sagt sjálfr, at þá eina sýn hafi hann sét svá, at honum brygði við. Þá sigaði svá at honum af öllu saman, möði ok því, er hann sá, at Glámr gaut sinum sjónum harðliga, at hann gat eigi brugðit saxinu ok lá nálíga í milli heims ok heljar. En því var meiri ófagnaðarkraptr með Glámi en flestum øðrum aþtrgongumøðnum, at hann mælti þá á þessa leið ... 

The moonlight was strong outside and there was dense cloud with openings in it; at times the cloud drifted in front of the moon, and at times drifted away. Now at the moment when Glámr fell, the cloud drifted away from the

---

*sceal gled fretan /—weaxan wonna leg—wigena strengel* (3114–5) ‘“Now embers shall consume—flames grow dark—the chief of warriors’. According to *SnEGylf*, 50–1, at Ragnarök Freyr (compare Beowulf) will fight and be killed by Surtr (compare the dragon), who will then burn the whole world.


100 Guðni Jónsson, *Grettis saga*, 121.
moon, and Glámr turned his eyes up keenly toward it, and Grettir has said so himself that that is the only sight he has seen that shook him. Then he [Grettir] sank—all his strength left him, what with exhaustion and what he saw, namely that Glámr gazed harshly with his eyes, so that he [Grettir] did not get the short-sword drawn and lay nearly between this world and Hel.\textsuperscript{101} And at that moment there was more unhappy power with Glámr than with most other undead men, so that he spoke then in this way ... Glámr then cursed Grettir, so that he would grow no stronger than at that moment and would thereby remain only half as strong as he would otherwise have become. Glámr, who had an enormous head (like Grendel), also said that the horrific vision of his moonlit eyes would always remain in Grettir’s sight.

From this passage it is clear that there is a connection between Glámr and the moon.\textsuperscript{102} Whatever the precise nature of that relationship, that it was probably close is indicated by the inclusion of the noun glámr, literally ‘gleam, evening twilight’, in a list of terms for ‘moon’.\textsuperscript{103} Glámr, it appears, was a moon-monster-man, one with giantish and lupine traits—like Grendel and Grendel’s mother.

Unlike Glámr, Grendel is not said to gaze at the moon, but his eyes did emit an unlovely light. This could be significant because in Old Norse poems an eye may be described as, for example, a brámáni or brátungl ‘eyelid/brow-moon’,\textsuperscript{104} while the moon was called skjágr ‘squinter’.\textsuperscript{105} Additionally, that the glint of a man’s eye might be imagined as a kind of terrifying moonlight indicative of homicidal intent.

\textsuperscript{101} Cf. the position of the hanging souls in the Blickling homily, and of the prostrate, tethered Moon in \textit{The Dead Moon}.

\textsuperscript{102} Cf. an episode in chapter 78 of Einar Ól. Sveinsson, \textit{Brennu-Njáls saga}, 192–3. Two men were out one night to the south of the burial mound of the hero Gunnarr when tungskin var bjart, en stundum dró fyrir ‘the moonlight was bright, but at times clouds drifted in front of it’. It seemed to them that the mound was open and lit by burning light, and that Gunnarr sá i móti tunglinu ‘gazed toward the moon’, whereupon he recited a poem which they interpreted as a call to avenge his death. On the significance of Glámr’s eyes, see also Ármann Jakobsson, \textit{Nine Saga Studies}, 131.


\textsuperscript{104} See \textit{LP}. The English lexicon includes ‘moon-eye’ and ‘moon-eyed’, for which see \textit{OED} and \textit{EDD}.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{SnESkáld}, I, 85.
is shown by the description of the gaze of *Eiríkr blóðøx* ‘Erik Blood-Axe’ in *Arinbjarnarkviða* ‘Arinbjørn’s Poem’, a skaldic composition attributed to the Icelander Egill Skalla-Grimsson.106 As Egill saw things during a supposed encounter between the pair in tenth-century York, during which his head was at stake:

‘Vasa þat tunglskin  
tryggt at líta  
né ógnlaust  
Eiriks bráa,  
þás ormfránn  
ennimáni  
skein allvalds  
œgigeislum.’107

‘The moonlight of Eiríkr’s eyelids was not safe to look at, nor terror-less, when the snake-glittering brow-moon [EYE]108 of the ruler shone with terrible rays.’

It may be added that although Glámr is introduced as a shepherd, when we first meet him he is bringing *hrís* ‘brushwood’ on a horse from *Godaskógr* ‘Temple-Priests’ Wood’ (also translatable as ‘Gods’ Wood’).109 This detail might allude to the tradition of the Man in the Moon as a gatherer of branches, although since Glámr was sent by one of the wood’s owners, we cannot assume the brushwood was stolen. More obviously significant is the living Glámr’s death during a night of blizzard and *niðamyrkr* ‘pitch blackness’—in other words, an icy night of the dark moon.110

### Grendel’s Mother and Norse Moon-Giantesses

Various Old Norse giantesses and troll-women are associated certainly or probably with the moon. They call to mind Grendel’s mother. We have already met Mána, the most obvious; Gerðr, whose likely lunar nature I return to in Chapter 16; and the pale Sinmara. In this section

---

106 See also n. 102 above.
108 For other identifications of the moon with a snake, see my discussion of the Gosforth Cross in Chapter 10.
I return to Mána in *Sörla saga sterka* and adduce comparable lunar characters in other Old Norse texts.

**Mána, Moon-Giantess and Thief**

As we saw earlier, *Sörla saga sterka* features a trollish old woman called Mána who is highly suggestive of Grendel’s mother, just as the episode in which she appears strongly resembles Beowulf’s fight in the mere. *Mána* almost certainly means ‘Moon’, being a feminine equivalent of ON máni ‘moon’. As such, a compelling parallel to Grendel’s mother is a troll-woman who personifies the moon. And the lunar dimension of Mána goes beyond her name.

Mána’s lunar nature probably explains why she has to acquire armour and a sword for Sörli within a month, as this is the approximate period from one new moon to the next. It may also help to explain the name of her husband, Skrimnir/Skrímnir, by supporting the suggestion that, in addition to relating to ON skrim/skrímsl/skrímsl ‘monster’, it may relate to ON skrim ‘faint light, gleam’. Mána’s husband might, therefore, have had a comparable lunar aspect, perhaps especially associated with the weak light of the waning moon.

Also for comparison with Grendel’s mother and Grendel, we may note that Mána and her husband are thieves and robbers. They plundered ships (as did Ýma’s sisters and, we shall discover, their father), which they attracted by sorcery, and they robbed villagers of their animals. Additionally, Mána declares: ‘Þar með höfum vit ok töfrat hingat marga góða gripi frá ýmsum herrum’ “Therewith we have also magicked here many good treasures from various lords.”113 Grendel’s lair contained armour and weapons, at least some presumably stripped from Danish warriors whom he had abducted as food; he also had magical power, though he is not said to have used it to acquire possessions.114 In the saga

---

111 Cf. B. Waggoner (trans.), *Sagas of Giants and Heroes* (New Haven, 2010), 192 n. 19.
112 See ANEW s.v. skrim; IO s.v. Skrimir, Skrímnir. The similar name Skrímir is shown to have a long ‘y’ by the metre of a verse list of giant-names and another of sword-names, a finding which favours the meaning ‘Big-Looking One’; see PTP, 713–4, 791–2. But there could well have been confusion, as well as deliberate exploitation of the ambiguity, of the forms and meanings of names that look and sound so similar.
113 FSN, III, 376.
114 Also compare Práimm’s magical acquisition of treasures, including the sword Mistilteinn, in *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* (below).
Mána sought the armour for Sörli from the Emperor út á Serkland ‘out in Shirt-land’, and it seems safe to assume that the ruler did not relinquish it willingly. She presumably also stole the accompanying sword.

Furthermore, it appears likely that behind the tale of Mána and Sörli is a myth about the defeat of a moon-giantess by the son of the sun, who acquired a marvellous sword in the process. This inference may be drawn from the name of Sörli’s divinely descended mother: Dagný ‘New Day’. We may recall that a light shone like the sun in the giants’ lair immediately after the death of Grendel’s mother, and that the overcoming of Vargeisa transformed her back into Álsól ‘All(?)-Sun’ or Álfsól ‘Elf-Sun’.

Mána and Brana

Another trollish female called Mána appears in the Icelandic Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra ‘Saga of Hálfdan, Brana’s Fosterling’, the oldest manuscripts of which date from the fifteenth century. She appears only briefly, however, as the five-year-old sister of a six-year-old troll-girl called Molda ‘Earth’ and of an older half-human, half-giantess named Brana, whom the hero and his companions encountered one evening when journeying á jökla ‘on ice’. The saga’s eponymous hero, a Danish prince whose name corresponds to OE Healfdene ‘Half-Dane’, ends a wrestling match between Mána and another man by toppling her over a cliff.

In this saga, Mána’s lunar nature is apparent only from her name and her link to her sister, Brana, whose actions, characteristics and name suggest a conflation of sun and full moon. Brana, who briefly chides Hálfdan for Mána’s demise, therefore merits examination in some detail.

115 FSN, IV, 287–318. For an English translation, see Waggoner, Sagas, 87–109. For discussion, see P. A. Jorgensen, ‘The Two-Troll Variant of the Bear’s Son Folktale in Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra and Gríms saga loðinkinna’, Arv 31 (1975), 35–43; McKinnell, Meeting the Other, 138–9, 239–40; McKinnell, ‘Fantasy Giantess’.
116 FSN, IV, 301.
117 At the end of the saga Hálfdan becomes king of Denmark. He has at least one indirect link to Ing(i), as his radiant sister is called Ingibjörg. It also happens that his queen is called Marsibil, the name of Ingi’s first wife in Hjálmphés saga.
118 FSN, IV, 301–2.
119 FSN, IV, 302.
Braná initially wrestled Hálfdan during this encounter. Before he got the upper hand, she then revealed that she was neither blöðdrekkur né mannæta ‘blood-drinker nor man-eater’, but had afforded him vital help during an earlier fight. She explained that it was she who had given him a gold-ornamented (i.e., presumably golden-hilted) knife in the nick of time during a fight with a man-stealing troll-woman called Sleggja ‘Sledgehammer’, after he had beheaded Sleggja’s male companion with an axe. Hálf dan had promptly used this knife to behead Sleggja. Earlier in that encounter, Sleggja had herself picked up a knife in the cave where they fought, before throwing it away to wrestle with Hálfdan, so we may suspect that the knife Hálfdan received was the same weapon.

Subsequently, Hálfdan returned this knife to Brana, as it was the only weapon with which she could kill her father, the giant Járnhauss ‘Iron-Skull’, a feat she achieved by stabbing him in the neck after extinguishing the light in his cave. Í því kom dagr yfir hellisgluggann ‘at that moment day came over the cave’s window [i.e., dawn broke]’, but ekki brá Brana sér við þat ‘Brana did not concern herself with that’. Instead, she simply opened a trapdoor in the cave’s floor, through which she disposed of her father’s corpse, and those of other giants, in the sea.

Not only was Brana resistant to the giant-petrifying effects of sunlight, but after sleeping with Hálfdan she hvarf í burtu hvern morgun, en kom ekki fyrr heim en at dagsetri ‘she set out every morning, and did not come back before nightfall’. And then, one day, she announced to his surprise that er sumardagr inn fyrst í á morgun ‘the first day of summer is in the morning [i.e., tomorrow]’.

Obvious, if inexact, parallels with the events and characters of the mere-episode of Beowulf and related texts will be apparent.

Braná is also described as walking before her sisters and as rauðkyrta ‘the red-tunicked one’, a description that indicates both pre-eminence and perhaps fieriness. That she walked unharmed through flames to save Hálfdan from a burning castle proves that neither fire nor heat could harm her.

120 FSN, IV, 299, 302. Cf. the sudden sight of the giant sword of Beowulf. Note also that the troll-woman’s name would suit a blacksmith.
121 FSN, IV, 303–4.
122 FSN, IV, 304–5.
123 FSN, IV, 301. The colour red may also have been associated with giants and trolls; Waggoner, Sagas, 192 n. 18.
124 FSN, IV, 313.
Finally, the name Brana is of interest. It might be identifiable not as the common Icelandic word for ‘cow’ (she has no apparent bovine characteristics), but as a word derived from brann, past tense of ON brenna ‘to burn’. More likely, however, since the moon-giantess acquired sunlight, the attributes of lunar and solar females were probably liable to conflation, in which case the meaning ‘cow’ could be appropriate. For moon-deities are often named after, represented by, or associated with bovines.

Skjaldvör, the ‘Dark-Moon Chest’

and More about the Nið-Dragon

Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts features a troll-woman whose likely origins as a lunar creature are also obscured. Both she and the story in which she appears are nevertheless of great interest.

The tale’s eponymous hero is the illegitimate son of a Norwegian called Ívarr ljómi ‘Light’ (so-called because of his outstanding handsomeness), who for much of the story does not recognize Þorsteinn as his son. Porsteinn’s mother was a woman whose muteness may point to a supernatural origin.

Porsteinn was a huge baby who had survived exposure as an infant with help from Freysteinn inn fagri ‘the Fair’, a slave of noble birth who was to become his companion and a free man. Porsteinn’s childhood spirit is externalized in one episode as a polar bear cub. He grew into an immensely strong young man who fought with the undead and with trolls.

Chapter 6 of the saga records how, during a dream, Porsteinn visited a burial mound under instruction from a large man in red clothing called Brynjar. In the mound Porsteinn severed the arm of the evil undead leader.

---

125 Cf. ANEW and ÍO s.v.
126 See Cashford, Moon, 102–6, 211–2, 219–20; also ibid., 84 for a folk-tale about a man who thought a cow had swallowed the moon and who therefore cut the beast open to release it. Note also the English word ‘moon-calf’ (OED, EDD).
127 For the text, see Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Harðar saga, 339–70.
128 Cf. Brana in Hálfdanar saga Brónufóstra.
129 Cf. Beowulf severing Grendel’s arm.
In chapter 9 we learn of troll-women besieging Heiðarskóg ‘Heath’s Forest’ in Norway,\textsuperscript{130} to which Óláfr Tryggvason had recently brought Christianity. There were three female trolls, two of them young and the third very large.\textsuperscript{131} The very large one was hairy all over like a grey bear. Walking with them was a mikinn mann, ef mann skyldi kalla ‘a great man, if man he could be so called’, along with two boy-trolls. He held a drawn sword which was svá bjart, at sindra þótt af ‘so bright that slag/cinders seemed to come from it’.\textsuperscript{132} The troll-man and troll-woman defeated the first group of men who were sent to kill them.

In chapter 10, Þorsteinn and his companion Styrkárr ‘Strengthen’ were next to try. They skied over mountains and came to a refuge-hut by a lake. After spotting and pursuing one of the younger females as she carried water from the lake, Þorsteinn pierced the door of the trolls’ sturdy hall with a spear. He entered and, as noted earlier,\textsuperscript{133} came to a bed-closet where brann ljós á kertistiku ‘a light burned on a candlestick’.\textsuperscript{134} Inside he saw a hairy, blue-black troll-woman lying in bed (she is evidently the larger female mentioned earlier). She was dressed in a shift that seemed to have been þveginn í mannablóði ‘washed in men’s blood’.\textsuperscript{135} She was sound asleep beneath a shield and sword that hung above her. Þorsteinn took the sword, pierced her with it under the left arm,\textsuperscript{136} this being the only spot on her body that looked potentially vulnerable. He put his full weight on the hilt, so that the point stuck in the bedclothes beneath her. She awoke and groped about, whereupon Þorsteinn, in one movement, slökkvir ljósit ‘extinguished the light’ and jumped over her into the bed.\textsuperscript{137} Assuming he had made for the door, she went the wrong way and sæfist hon á sverðinu ok deyr ‘she is put to sleep on the sword and dies’.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{130} The name is otherwise unattested. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 358 n. 3 propose that it is a distortion of \textit{Eiðaskógur} on the border between Norway and Sweden. Alternatively, I tentatively suggest that it might be a rationalization of \textit{‘Heiðsskóg ‘Forest of Heavenly Brightness’}.\textsuperscript{131} Cf. Brana and her sisters in \textit{Hálfdanar saga Bröðufóstra}.\textsuperscript{132} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 359. Cf. Surtr.\textsuperscript{133} See Chapter 3 of this book.\textsuperscript{134} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 360.\textsuperscript{135} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 360.\textsuperscript{136} A sexual euphemism?\textsuperscript{137} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 360.\textsuperscript{138} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 361.
Porsteinn pulled the sword, a ‘firebrand’ (*brandinum*), from her corpse and proceeded further inside the trolls’ lair. There he saw a big man (evidently the ‘great man’ of the previous chapter) sitting beneath a full set of armour. There too were a fairly young female troll called *Skjalldís* ‘Shield (Supernatural) Lady’ and two troll-boys called *Hak* ‘Hook’ and *Haki* ‘Hake(?).’

*Skjalldís* and her father, now called *Járnskjöldr* ‘Iron Shield’, briefly discussed the presence of attackers. He declared that he feared only Porsteinn and that ‘svá er sem mér hangi bláð fyrir auga um öll mín forlög’ “‘it’s as if a blade hangs before my eyes concerning all my destiny.’”

She reassured him that Porsteinn was unlikely to come there, before running out and tripping over her dead mother. At once, Porsteinn severed her arm with the sword called *Skjaldvararnautr* ‘Skjaldvör’s Gift/Booty’, a name which identifies the dead troll-woman as *Skjaldvör* ‘Shield-Goddess’. Skjalldís fought Porsteinn with a *skálm* ‘short sword’, but was defeated.

Next Porsteinn encountered Járnskjöldr, who held the drawn sword, which was *bæði bjart ok bitrligt, svá at Porsteinn þóttist ekki slíkt sét hafa* ‘both bright and sharp, such that Porsteinn thought he had never seen such’. Járnskjöldr wounded him in the thigh with this sword, but the sword *renndi niðr í völlinn allt upp at hjöltum* ‘ran down into the ground all the way up to the hilt’. As Járnskjöldr bent to withdraw it, Porsteinn dismembered him with Skjaldvararnautr, before beheading him. Surprisingly, though, that was not the end of hostilities in the troll-hall.

Chapter 11 records how, when proceeding further in, Porsteinn was seized and thrown down. Skjaldvör was back from the dead, and harder to deal with than before. As she stooped to bite his windpipe, Porsteinn promised to convert to Christianity and serve Óláfr, whereupon:

139 Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Harðar saga*, 361.
141 For *-nautr* in sword-names, see Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*, 57.
142 Cf. Vargeisa as the goddess Vör in *Hjálmphés saga*, and Sinmara as the goddess Eir in *Svipdagsmál*.
143 Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Harðar saga*, 362.
144 Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Harðar saga*, 362.
kemr geisli inn í skálann ógurliga bjartr ok stendr þvert framan í augun kerlingar. Við þá sýn varð henni svá íllt, at dró ór henni mætt ok magn allt. Hon tók þá at geispa niðörkliga. Hleypr þá ór henni spýja ok ofan í andlit Þorsteini, svá at náliga helt honum við bana af illsku ok óþef þeim, er af stóð.\textsuperscript{145}

a terribly bright beam comes into the hall and streams \textquote[ literally ‘stands across’] in front of the old woman’s eyes. At that sight she became so ill that all might and main drained from her. She then began to yawn niðörkliga. Then spew runs from her and down into Þorsteinn’s face, so that he scarcely kept himself from death what with the wickedness and stench that arose from it.

The author adds cryptically that people thought some of her vomit must have come into contact with Þorsteinn’s breast, and that, whether or not this was the cause, he did not have a wholly human form thereafter.\textsuperscript{146} In any case, the pair lay between life and death, with neither able to get up.

In chapter 12, however, Styrkárr comes to the rescue.\textsuperscript{147} Having beaten to death the two troll-boys, each armed with a sax, he set out to help Þorsteinn. He too dedicated himself to Christianity, on condition that he find Þorsteinn alive and well. He soon found Þorsteinn pinned beneath Skjaldförr’s body, which he pulled to one side, and helped him up. Together they proceeded to break Skjaldförr’s very thick neck. After cremating all the trolls, they searched the hall, but found nothing of value. They then returned home.

Chapter 13 describes how they attended a feast at which both Óláfr and Ívarr ljómi were present, the latter seated in a position of high honour. Þorsteinn turned to Ívarr með brugðit sverðit Skjaldfararnaut ok stakk blóðreflinum fyrrir brjóst honum ‘with the drawn sword Skjaldfararnautr and stuck the point before his breast’.\textsuperscript{148} He told Ívarr either to receive death on its point or acknowledge his paternity. Ívarr gladly chose the latter option. Óláfr then spoke to them of Christianity and praised God for his miracles. Both Þorsteinn and Styrkárr were then baptized.

In chapter 15 a coda to these events records that the pair later re-encountered the troll-girl, now identified as Skjaldergerðr ‘Shield-Gerðr’, whom Þorsteinn had earlier chased, along with other foes.

\textsuperscript{145} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 363.
\textsuperscript{146} Cf. Glámr’s curse which permanently reduces Grettir’s strength.
\textsuperscript{147} Cf. Wiglaf as Beowulf’s lone helper against the dragon.
\textsuperscript{148} Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, \textit{Harðar saga}, 365.
She revealed that she had removed her parents’ treasures from their hall during the fighting and hidden them in a cellar. She then fought them even more ferociously than her mother, but Þorsteinn cut her in two with Skjaldvararnautr. Styrkárr, for his part, killed Skjaldgerðr’s husband and his brothers. They took many treasures from the cellar.

For all their differences, these parts of Þorsteinn’s story are clearly akin to episodes familiar from Beowulf. I shall not labour all the parallels, but merely highlight the key ones for this investigation.

The extraordinarily strong, bear-like Þorsteinn corresponds to Beowulf, the troll-woman Skjaldvör to Grendel’s mother, and the troll-man Járnskjöldr to Grendel. These are the main characters in episodes that share references or allusions to forest, mountain, lake, ice, sudden climactic light and, if my interpretation of Beowulf is correct, Christianity (Conversion). Beowulf’s giant sword finds parallel in both Skjaldvör’s sword and the—notably fiery and bright—sword of Járnskjöldr, with which, despite wounding the hero (an unusual achievement), the troll-man entirely fails to save himself. That Þorsteinn does not take Járnskjöldr’s sword in this story reflects, I suggest, its underlying identity with Skjaldvör’s weapon, which he does take, rather as (I propose in Chapter 16) the giant sword shares an underlying identity with Hrunting.

Less apparent are two easily overlooked correspondences.

First is that the blade of Járnskjöldr’s sword disappears into the ground up to its hilt (as does Skjaldvararnautr’s through her body and into the bed). It is not inconceivable that this might be a divergent parallel to the loss of the blade of Beowulf’s giant sword, leaving only its hilt.

Second is that two of Þorsteinn’s father-figures together suggest Yngvi-Freyr. First, Þorsteinn’s biological father, Ívarr ljómi ‘Ívarr (sun)beam/light’ is radiant, like Freyr. His name not only looks akin to Ingvarr (Ing-varr) but may derive from *InhuharjaR, *Ínhwia-harjaR.

---

149 Given the parallels (identified below) between this story and the final dragon-episode in Beowulf, in which the hero bears an iron shield (2337–9) against the dragon’s fiery sword-breath, the presence here of Járnskjöldr ‘Iron Shield’ is of some interest.

150 A third, a poor man who became Þorsteinn’s adoptive father, is called Krummr ‘Raven(?); cf. krummi ‘crook-clawed one’, a term for raven in PTP, 946–7. He perhaps alludes to Óðinn, the raven-god father of Þórr.
381

14. Grendel, His Mother and Other Moon-Monsters

or *InguharjaR, which would make him a late manifestation of ‘Ing(vi) the warrior’.\(^{151}\) It also appears significant that Ívarr is not only identified with a ljómi, but connected with a giantess’s sword equivalent to the leoma—and thereby probably the giant sword—of Beowulf. This connection appears purely confrontational in the story as told in Þorsteins þáttir uxafóts. However, a different account, in Sörla þáttir, records that Þorsteinn had taken Járnskjöldr’s sword—it does not mention Skjaldvararnautr—and gefit ‘given’ it to Ívarr, who subsequently wielded it.\(^{152}\) This is perhaps the older version of events.\(^{153}\) Notably, too, in Ívarr’s hand this sword became a Christian weapon, which he used to lay to rest men condemned by Óðinn’s magic to fight eternally, as was proven by the blod a suerde Juars ‘blood on Ívarr’s sword’.\(^{154}\)

In this regard, it is notable that a second father to Þorsteinn is, in effect, Freysteinn, the noble slave who saved him from death by exposure. Freysteinn’s fairness suggests Freyr, and his name means ‘Freyr-Stone’ or ‘Freyr’s Twig’.

As such, þorsteinn ‘Þórr/Thunder-Stone’ or ‘Þórr’s Twig’—who is imbued with immense strength and who was once apparently the son of at least one god of heavenly light—could well fill the role of emissary of heavenly radiance in a fight against lunar monsters. But where is the moon in this tale? It is obscured, but still, I believe, discernible in the one word I left untranslated in the quoted passage above: niðörkliga.

This adverb, which describes how Skjaldvör yawned after the appearance of the brilliant light in her second fight with Þorsteinn, occurs nowhere else in Old Norse literature and has puzzled commentators. The editors of the standard edition of the tale infer from the context that it must mean ‘ógurlega, andstygigilega’,\(^{155}\) and it has been translated into English as ‘hugely’.\(^{156}\) Another suggestion is that it is a mistake

---

\(^{151}\) See ANEW s.v. Ívarr; ÍO s.v. Ívar, Ívarr. An alternative derivation, from *íwa-hariR, makes Ívarr a ‘yew/bow-warrior’.


\(^{153}\) Binns, ‘Story’, 39, however, considers it the author’s misremembrance of Þorsteins þáttir uxafóts.

\(^{154}\) Guðbrandr Vigfússon and Unger, Flateyjarbok, I, 283.

\(^{155}\) Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Hardar saga, 363 n. 3.

\(^{156}\) Viðar Hreinsson, Complete Sagas, IV, 351.
for an otherwise unattested adverb *nīðvirkliga*, which would mean ‘villainously’ or ‘detestably’. The truth, I propose, is both stranger and more informative.

I interpret nīðörkliga as a compound of either nīð ‘dark (of) moon’ or nīð ‘derision’, ‘scornful treatment’ + örk ‘ark, chest’ + -liga ‘-ly’. In other words, Skjaldr yawned ‘in the manner of a dark-moon (or derision) chest’. The sense ‘derision’ (for nīð) would be apt, given that Skjaldr vomits on Þorsteinn. At the same time, nīð ‘dark (phase of the) moon’ explains more of the episode’s curious features. Especially if the unusual compound nīðörkliga derives from a lost poetic source, we need not necessarily choose between these two possibilities.

Skjaldr’s sudden yawning is interpretable in more than one way, which need not be mutually exclusive either. The most obvious in context is that it results from sleepiness caused by an attack by the spirits of her enemies, for only shortly earlier Járnskjöldr had explained his drowsiness in such a way: ‘ligjja á mér hugir stórra manna’ ‘the spirits of great men are attacking me’. But yawning and enervation at the sight of brilliant light would also be a natural response for a lunar creature, for whom this radiance would signal dawn and the approach of bedtime.

It is probably no coincidence that when she lost consciousness earlier in the episode, Skjaldr was ‘put to sleep’ (sæfist) on her sword—a memory, I suggest, of the sword as a solar symbol.

If Skjaldr is a lunar creature (an idea compatible with her name), this could also explain both the ‘ark/chest’ and her vomiting. The element

---

157 ONP s.v. ?nīðörkliga.
159 Cf. the potential ambiguity of nīð in Beowulf.
161 Cf. how light put the dragons to sleep in Gull-Dóris saga, which may indicate that they were originally nīð ‘waning/dark moon’ dragons like Nīðhöggr and, arguably, Beowulf’s niðraca; Pórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Harðar saga, 188. Cf. also Sóti’s loss of strength when confronted by candlelight in his otherwise dark mound in Harðar saga.
162 ‘Moon’ is an element in numerous Old Norse kennings for ‘shield’, for which see ‘Kennings for SHIELD’, in Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages,
-örk- would be explicable by analogy with Sinmara’s ‘chest of rough iron’ in *Svipdagsmál*, which she would open when Svipdagr presented (and possibly killed) her with a ‘radiant sickle’ (compare the brilliant light). In *Svipdagsmál*, this likely opening would have resulted in Svipdagr gaining possession of the sword Lævateinn; in the prose tale, this idea is present but distorted, Þorsteinn having already extracted Skjaldvararnautr from Skjaldvör’s body, after having taken it from above her bed. In this case, then, Skjaldvör is herself the open container.¹⁶³

Additionally, Skjaldvör’s remarkable return from the dead is explicable if she is (or was originally) a moon-creature, for the moon regularly appears to return from the dead as part of its cycle. This cycle could also explain the subsequent fight with Skjaldvör’s even stronger daughter.

Assuming Skjaldvör is a moon-creature, it is significant that she returned stronger after her hall had been, one imagines, plunged into complete darkness by the extinguishing of her candle and the burying of Járnskjöldr’s bright sword-blade deep in the ground. Her strengthening suggests that she was more powerful at this point because she had become specifically a dark-moon monster, a nið-monster.

The same assumption may enrich our understanding of Skjaldvör’s yawning and derisive vomiting. For by yawning at the light, she was *gaping* at the light. The implicitly lunar wolf *SkpIl* ‘Mockery’ presumably also opened her mouth to mock the sun when driving it toward Hati, her fellow hunter; it may not be coincidental that Skjaldvör’s daughter, Skjaldgerðr, has a half-namesake in Hrímgerðr, daughter of Hati.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, as we have seen, a likely Norse moon-snake with twin wolf-heads gapes at the sun-cross and probably

---

¹⁶³ Just as, we shall find in Chapter 15 (below), Grendel’s mother may be too.

¹⁶⁴ That several of this troll-family have ‘Shield’-names also raises interesting questions. As noted above, there is a conceptual connection between the moon and a shield in Old Norse poetic diction. But the same is true of the sun, which is a *himintarga* ‘sky-shield’ in *bōrsdrāpa* (see Chapter 10) and, in another source, the *skyja skjoldr* ‘shield of the clouds’ (*Page, Icelandic Rune Poem*, 29, 36), from the heat of which rocks and sea are protected by a shield called *Svpl* ‘Cool’ (*Grímnismál* 38; a notion perhaps derived from the sight of the dark moon during a solar eclipse). On this basis, did the shield above Skjaldvör’s bed once represent stolen sunlight? And was this solar shield originally taken from the Skjöldingar, the Scyldings ‘Shieldings’ of Beowulf? Was her sword taken from them, too?
breathes fire on, or vomits at, Christ (implicitly the Sun) on the Gosforth Cross.\textsuperscript{165}

Skjaldvör’s derisive vomiting, which almost killed Þorsteinn and left him permanently altered, might also parallel the fiery projectile emissions from the semi-black moon-serpent described by Gervase of Canterbury.\textsuperscript{166} More strikingly, it may connect with the climactic fire-dragon, the niðdraca ‘waning/dark moon(?) dragon’, of Beowulf. In Skjaldvör’s case, since she vomits at her defeat, her spewing might equate to the moon’s unwilling return of internalized solar light and heat, or, from another perspective, the sun’s reposition of its light and heat. In the niðdraca’s case, its response to the theft of a precious cup from its hoard is to vomit on those who stole and received this treasure. Once \textit{wæs dæg sceacen / wyrme on willan} ‘day was passed, to the worm’s pleasure’ (2306–7):

\begin{verbatim}
Da se gæst ongan  gledum spiwan,
beorht hofu bærnan;  bryneleoma stod
eldum on andan;  no ðær aht cwices
lað lyftfloga  læfan wolde.
Wæs þæs wyrmes wig  wide gesyne,
nearoftages nið,  nean ond feorran,
hu se guðsceaða  Geata leode
hatode ond hynde. (2312–9)
\end{verbatim}

Then the guest/creature [i.e., the dragon] began to spew embers,\textsuperscript{167} to burn bright houses/shrines; burning light stood in malice for men; the loathsome air-flier wanted to leave nothing alive there. The worm’s warfare was widely seen, the narrow/dark(?)-hostile/shining/coloured one’s nið, near and far, how the battle-scather/criminal hated\textsuperscript{168} and humiliated the people of the Geatas.

The dragon, I suggest, prefigures Skjáldvör by vomiting insultingly and violently against another Þórr-like figure, Beowulf, the lord of the Geatas

\begin{footnotes}
\item[165] See Chapter 10. In this connection Skjaldvör’s grey hairiness may be recalled; although the author likens her to a bear, elsewhere it is normally wolves who are grey.
\item[166] See Chapter 10. Note also CV s.v. \textit{imi-gustr/imu-gustr} ‘giant’s gust/blast’, a term for ‘disgust’, in which the first element relates to \textit{im} ‘embers’.
\item[167] KB defines instances of \textit{gled} in \textit{Beowulf} as ‘fire, flame’, as does DOE, but the base sense is ‘a live coal, ember’ (DOE s.v. \textit{gled} 1.a).
\item[168] There may be a pun on \textit{hatian} ‘to become hot or inflamed, be oppressed by heat’.
\end{footnotes}
and the recipient of the stolen cup. As Skjáldvör vomits like a nið/níð-vessel, so the niðdraca vomits embers identified with nið. In the quoted passage this word’s apposition to wig ‘warfare’ indicates the sense ‘hostility’ primarily. But at the same time, the dragon’s wig is manifest as bryneleoma ‘burning light’, which hints at a secondary link between nið, the niðdraca and radiance, here presumably a fire (potentially of apocalyptic darkness) that reduces buildings to blackened ruins. Should the distinction between a dragon and a troll-woman or giantess be deemed too great for this proposed parallel to be significant, a detail from Völuspá 50 may be noted; it describes how, at Ragnarök, the gaping Miðgarðsormr (possibly shown vomiting fire on the Gosforth Cross) writhes i jǫtunmôði ‘in giant-rage’, jǫtunn (cognate with OE eoten), which fundamentally means ‘one with sustenance for eating or authority over eating’, elsewhere being a term for a humanoid giant. It appears that, in Old Norse mythology, snakes, wolves and giants could blend.

To a degree, Beowulf’s vomiting ember-dragon may also foreshadow Vargeisa, the composite ember-monster from whose mouth Hjálmpéór acquired Snarvendiill, the radiant sword that parallels the giant-sword. For not only does the dragon spew embers, which Vargeisa also implicitly contained, but the resulting bryneleoma that stod ‘stood’ grimly echoes the propitious leoma that stod in the niðsele at the moment of Grendel’s mother’s beheading. I argued earlier that a likely source of that leoma is the giant sword, which is paired with a beadoleama

---

169 Cashford, Moon, 183–4 refers to myths that describe ‘soot, ash, blood and mud on the moon’, due to the moon’s smudged and sometimes bloody appearance. For example, according to an Inuit story, ‘Moon’s light is always pale because his wick burned down to embers in the beginning, and his light is the cold light of winter. Whenever he disappears from the sky in winter, he crosses the sea of ice with his dogs to hunt food for the dead humans in the realm of death. But Sun gives out light and heat, especially in summer when Moon becomes pale in her light, since in the beginning her wick of flame kept on blazing’ (ibid., 184); see also Krupp, Beyond the Blue Horizon, 60–1; Witzel, Origins, 146. Note, too, the quoted passage’s association of the sun and moon with burning candles.

170 Cf. the heaðotorht ‘battle-bright’ warcry with which Beowulf challenges the dragon (2553).

171 Battaglia, ‘Cannibalism in Beowulf’, 145.

172 Note especially SnEgylf, 35, where a giant-builder, who had demanded the sun and moon and Freyja as payment, flies i jǫtunmôði ‘into a giant-rage’; the same text paraphrases and quotes Völuspá 50 on 50–1. The potential relationship of Grendel’s mother to the Babylonian Tiamat and the Biblical Leviathan should also be noted (see Chapter 15).
'battle-light', Hrunting. The implicit image of the dragon spewing a fiery sword is reinforced by a subsequent description of the dragon’s flames as hildeleoman ‘battle-lights’ (2583; quoted in context above), a word, unique to Beowulf, which earlier described a sword (1143). That we are justified in briefly picturing the dragon’s flames as swords shining in the darkness of night is further indicated by the dragon’s description as hioroweallende middelnihtum ‘sword-welling in the middle of the night’ (2781), shortly after a reference to Beowulf’s dragon-injuring sword (2777–8).\textsuperscript{173}

Moreover, in its hating and humiliating (hatode ond hynde), the dragon of Beowulf also appears to prefigure the wolves Hati ‘Hater’ and Sköll ‘Mockery’, the object of whose hate and mockery, and their eventual prey, was the sun (compare again the snake with twin wolf-heads that gapes and vomits fire at Christ the Sun on the Gosforth Cross). The object of the niðdraca’s wrath was the beorht hofu ‘bright houses/shrines’ of Beowulf. Given the precedent of Heorot as a bright, implicitly solar hall, which was destined to burn down and which stood exposed, in contrast to Grendel’s concealed, secret niðsele ‘waning/dark-moon(? ) hall’, Beowulf’s ‘bright houses’ may also have a solar aspect. Rather similarly, they stood in contrast to the niðdraca’s dryhte sele dyrne ‘secret splendid hall’ (2320) and were also destined to burn down.

If this interpretation holds, the stolen cup of Beowulf may, on one level, symbolize—or once have symbolized—the sun or sunlight which was taken from a dark-moon dragon’s earthen den and presented to Beowulf, the human representative of a sun-god.\textsuperscript{174} This (searo) since fah ‘work of art adorned with treasure’ (2217), this fæted wæge ‘plated cup’ (2282), this sincfæt ‘treasure-vessel’ (2231, 2300), this drincfæt dyre


\textsuperscript{174} Panchenko, ‘Scandinavian Background’ adduces evidence indicating that ancient Europeans believed that the sun travelled in a cup by night; also recall the reference to Sólkatla ‘Sun Cauldron’ in the passage from Sólarljóð involving the likely recovery from a burial mound of a solar symbol possessed by a lunar(?) dwarf (see Chapter 13). For a golden cup or bowl as a solar symbol, see also MIFL, motifs A722.1 ‘Sun’s night journey in golden goblet’ and A724.2 ‘The sun a golden bowl on the rim of which sits a peacock; both bowl and peacock are in a crystal box, which rests on a flying chariot’. 
'precious drinking vessel' (2306) stolen from the lyftfloga ‘air-flier’, would then parallel the lyftfæt leohtlic ‘radiant air-vessel’ stolen from the solar creature by the Grendel-like moon-creature of Riddle 29. Alternatively, though less likely, in addition to possibly being a plausible portent of impending death and apocalypse (a poculum mortis ‘cup of death’),175 the presumably silver- or gold-plated cup could suggest a crescent or half-moon.176

Among the implicit parallels drawn between the dragon-episode and the poem’s earlier personages, events and themes, those between the dragon and the sword-thief Grendel appear clear.177 So does the resonance of the presentation of a bright, stolen treasure to an elderly lord. Thus the poet surely calls to mind the fiery-eyed Grendel and his mother when describing how the dragon had gledum forgrunden ‘ground to pieces with embers’ Beowulf’s stronghold (2335) and gledum forgrunden Wiglaf’s shield (2677).178 He also implicitly links the dragon and Grendel as humiliators: as the dragon hynde ‘humiliated’, so Grendel had inflicted hynðu ‘humiliation’ (166, 277, 475, 593). Most strikingly, when describing how Frea sceawode / fira fyrngeweorc forman siðe ‘The lord [Beowulf] gazed on the ancient work of living beings/men [i.e., the cup]

177 Cf. DuBois, ‘Dragon’, 822: ‘The dragon story seems to me a variation upon the Grendel story’.
178 Cf. ‘forgrand gramum; ond nu wîð Grendel sceal …’ ‘I ground fierce ones to pieces; and now against Grendel I shall …’ (424). The name Grendel/Grindel suggests, and may be etymologically related to, OE grindan ‘to grind’ (KB, 467). Cf. also the giantesses, including Grendel’s mother, associated with maelstroms, and the connection between male barley-giants and milling in Norse myth (see Chapter 8). For the likelihood that, after cremation, human bones were ground—in effect, milled like grain—and deposited in water in ancient Scandinavian mortuary ritual, see A. Kaliff, Fire, Water, Heaven and Earth: Ritual Practice and Cosmology in Ancient Scandinavia: An Indo-European Perspective (Stockholm, 2007), 135–46. In this light, it appears that the passages of Svipdagr through the maelstrom in Svipdagsmál and of Beowulf through the churning waters of the mere might be interpretable as symbolic deaths through disintegration, and that their emersion symbolizes rebirth.
The Waning Sword

for the first time’ (2285–6), the poet recalls the moment when another frea, Hroðgar, sceawode ‘gazed’ at the giant-sword’s hilt, the enta ærgeworc ‘ancient work of giants’. Accordingly, if the hilt is solar, the cup may well be, too—in which case the niðdraca that guards it so jealously in the earth is all the more likely to be a ‘waning/dark-moon dragon’.

Hyndla at the ‘Darkness of Darkesses’

The Eddic poem Hyndluljóð refers to Norse dynasties and personages mentioned in Beowulf, but merits attention here especially because of the identities of the two disputants it describes, one of whom could well be a giantess of the dark moon.

Hyndluljóð concerns a meeting between the goddess Freyja and the giantess Hyndla ‘Little Hound/Bitch’, who probably descends from a certain Viðólfr ‘Wood-Wolf’ (33)—note the association of giant and wolf again. At the rǫkr rǫkra ‘twilight of twilights/darkness of darkesses’ (1), Freyja, who rides a glóar, gullinbursti ‘glowing, golden-bristled’ boar (7), calls on the cave-dwelling Hyndla to wake up and ride with her to Valholl, Óðinn’s hall. Hyndla, however, refuses to mount one of her own wolves. Freyja therefore proposes that they talk where they are. She wants to learn from Hyndla the ancestry of a certain Óttarr, whom Hyndla has identified, despite Freyja’s denial, as the goddess’s boar-mount. Freyja asks in particular about members of dynasties including the Skjöldungar (the Scyldingas of Beowulf), the Skilfingar (the Scylfingas of Beowulf) and the Ylfingar (the Wylfingas of Beowulf) (11). Hyndla proceeds to enumerate Óttarr’s forebears, who include, among many others, Hálfdan, hæstr Skjöldunga ‘highest of the Skjöldungar’ (14), who corresponds to Healfdene, father of Hroðgar in Beowulf. Óttarr’s relatives also apparently include Freyr, whose marriage to Gerðr is mentioned (30).

When Freyja asks for a drink to fortify her boar’s memory, the verbal exchange between goddess and giantess ends acrimoniously. Not all details of the poem’s conclusion are clear, but it appears that Hyndla casts (or threatens to cast) fire at Freyja—or vice versa—before declaring ‘Hyr sé ec brenna, enn hauðr loga’ ”‘I see fire burning, and the earth ablaze’” (49), asserting that most people must endure death, and

179 Cf. the arson planned by the troll-woman Forað (possibly a personification of the dark moon) in chapter 5 of Ketils saga hængs; FSN, II, 171.
defiantly commanding that Óttarr be brought a poisoned drink. Freyja, however, triumphantly rejects Hyndla’s curse and asks all the gods to aid Óttarr.

Although *Hyndluljóð* makes no explicit mention of sun or moon, several details raise the distinct possibility that both may be relevant to this discussion. The *rǫkr rǫkra* mentioned in the opening stanza could well suggest a night of the dark moon. This interpretation would accord with Hyndla’s slumber and reluctance to move, if she were a lunar being (compare the deathly sleep of Skjálдвör and Grendel). Such a nature cannot be proven, but Hyndla’s association with wolves and possible fieriness call to mind Grendel’s mother. Freyja, for her part, is implicitly associated with the sun or moon through her glowing, golden-bristled boar, which presumably cast enough light to admit the possibility of she and Hyndla travelling in what was otherwise pitch blackness; it also recalls the heavenly radiance emitted by Freyr’s similar mount. Additionally, the fire that Hyndla sees burning on the earth could be an image of the sun rising over the horizon at dawn, which would turn her to stone—recall the fates of Hrímrgerðr and Alvíss.¹⁸⁰

*Hyndluljóð* also shares with *Beowulf* an interest in boar-warriors.¹⁸¹ Óttarr, who as Freyja’s mount is implicitly her sexual partner (like Freyr), took the form of a glowing, gold-bristled boar,¹⁸² a counterpart of Freyr’s. *Beowulf* mentions a Geatish warrior called Eofor ‘Boar’ who killed King Ongenþeo(w) by breaking his *entisic helm* ‘giantish helm’ with an *ealdsweord eotonisc* ‘giantish old-sword’ (2485–9; 2977–81), for which he was rewarded with marriage to the daughter of Hygelac. In addition, *Beowulf* describes warriors wearing helmets adorned with shining figurines or other images of boars, sometimes explicitly golden.¹⁸³ These are introduced early in the poem in the description of the approach of Beowulf and his men to Heorot:

¹⁸⁰ The passage in question may be deliberately polysemous. The fire may also suggest the flames of Ragnarök and the blaze that accompanied the movements of Fórr’s goat-drawn chariot.

¹⁸¹ For another Old Norse text describing a boar-warrior, see *borsteins saga Vikingssonar*, chapter 8; Rafn, *Formaldar sögur*, II, 403.

¹⁸² In stanza 7 Freyja calls it *Hildisvíni* ‘Battle-Swine’ and says it was made by the dwarves Dáinn ‘Deceased One’ and Nabbi ‘Bump’.

The Waning Sword

eoforlic scionon
ofer hlearbergen, gehroden golde,
fah ond fyheard (303–5)

boar-bodies [i.e., boar-figurines] shone over cheek-guards, adorned with gold, shining and fire-hard(ened).

To this extent, at least, Beowulf appears analogous to Óttarr. But it may be noteworthy, too, that Beowulf’s boar-protection is mentioned immediately before he ventures into the mere to fight Grendel’s mother: his shining helmet is besette swinlicum ‘embellished with boar-bodies’ (1453), presumably in this case plate-images of boars or boar-helmeted warriors.¹⁸⁴ Albeit in different ways, both Beowulf and Óttarr find themselves under the cover of a shining, protective boar or boars associated with Yngvi-Freyr or Freyja, before confronting a hostile, wolfish giantess associated (if my thesis is correct) with the waning or dark moon. And they do so in episodes that arguably both conclude with the giantess’s defeat and the appearance of the sun.¹⁸⁵

Þórgunna, Mána-Ljótur and the Half-Moon

A giantess (of sorts) associated with the moon appears in the thirteenth-century Icelandic Eyrbyggja saga ‘Saga of the Dwellers of Eyr’, along with a reference to (it appears) a hideous lunar associate.¹⁸⁶ The episode in question concerns a Hebridean Christian woman of giant stature called Þórgunna, an inauspicious moon-portent and assaults on the living by the undead.

Chapter 51 of the saga describes the burial of Þórgunna, whose instructions about burning her belongings after her death were

---

¹⁸⁴ Boar-crested helmets are shown on a seventh-century bronze die, probably for making helmet-plates, from Torslunda, Sweden; KB, xv (fig. 6). Beowulf and Hroðgar are also associated with the boar through the latter’s gift of an eoforheadfodseg ‘boar-head banner’ (2152). Hroðgar’s link with the boar, together with his lordship of the stag-hall Heorot, and his gift of horses to Beowulf (1035–45), further strengthens his likely links with Yngvi-Freyr, as these are that god’s three totemic animals.

¹⁸⁵ Conversely, Krappe, ‘Yngvi-Frey’, who relates Ing to the Irish god Aengus (mac Oc), claims that either divinity had a human counterpart (the Danish King Fróði III and Diarmaid Ua Duibne, respectively) who was slain by a human in the shape of a boar or, in Fróði’s case, a ‘sea-cow’.

flouted, despite her warnings that trouble would result. Various young manuscripts of the saga record that as she was laid in the ground, people heard her complaining of cold legs to a certain Mána-Ljótur ‘Moon/Moon’s Ugly (One)’.

In chapter 52 we read that on the evening of the corpse-bearers’ return, people gathered around the fire at a farmstead at Fróðá in Iceland. On the wall they saw a tungl hált ‘half-moon’, which went backwards around the house and andsælís ‘contrary to the course of the sun’; one of those present declared that it was urðarmána ‘fate’s moon’ and that it forboded the death of men. In subsequent chapters detail a series of mysterious deaths followed by revenant-hauntings, until the undead are finally exorcized on the evening before Candlemas.

The Old One and the Pitchforker, Again

In Chapter 10 of this study, when analyzing Norse myths about sun-hunting wolves, we met the giantess known simply as in aldná ‘the old one’ and her most formidable male offspring, the tungls tjúgari ‘moon’s pitchforker’ (if my translation is correct). They feature at the heart of Völuspá (40–1), the most accomplished surviving poem of Old Norse mythology, and they warrant further examination here as potentially highly significant counterparts to Grendel’s mother and Grendel.

The moon’s pitchforker has much in common with Grendel. Both are:

(a) Notorious, lone, male offspring of an anonymous old giantess.

(b) Part giant, part wolf. The pitchforker in Völuspá is an offspring of Fenrir in troll-form. In Snorri’s commentary on this passage in Gylfaginning, Mánagarmr, the equivalent to the lunar pitchforker, is both jötunn and vargr. Correspondingly, the troll-like Grendel—whose father, admittedly, is unknown—is both eoten and wearg (heorowearh). Grendel, furthermore, is the son of a brimwylf ‘sea she-wolf’, a grundwyrgen ‘a female

---

ground/depth-wearg’, with whom he inhabits wolf-haunted country. Additionally, he preys on a stag in the form of Heorot.

(c) Eaters of dying or dead men.

(d) Reddeners of halls associated with divinity. Grendel leaves Heorot, the hall of the friends of Ing, *blode fah ... heorodreorig* ‘coloured with blood ... sword-bloody’ (*Beowulf* 934–5).

(e) Implicitly bearers of forked weapons, which they both presumably used to assault divine halls. Grendel’s weapons are one or both of his terrible arms, one of which is described as an *unheoru* ‘un/bad-sword’ with steel-like nail-spurs (985–6), which, I suggest, are comparable to the prongs of a large fork. The reinforced door of Heorot, hall of the friends of Ing, gave way as soon as Grendel touched it with his hands (721–4).

(f) Last but certainly not least, associated (in my view) with the moon, especially in its dark phase.

For her part, ‘the old one’, the lunar pitchforker’s mother, has similarities to Grendel’s mother. Both are:

(a) Wolfish giantesses.

(b) Old. Grendel’s mother had watched the waters of the mere for *hund missera* ‘one hundred seasons’ (1498).188

(c) Mothers of comparable sons. Possibly, Grendel’s wolfish mother had also spawned the wolves which haunted the land around her mere, just as the lunar pitchforker’s mother had spawned the race of wolves.

(d) Nameless.

(e) Inhabitants of similar places.

188 Note also, with regard to the previous point, that ON *vitnir*, a poetic term for ‘wolf’, means literally ‘watcher’. Other creatures of the mere—functionally comparable to the wolves of *Beowulf* and the guard-dogs (watch-dogs) of *For Skírnis* and *Svipdagsmál*—are also watchers. On the slopes of headlands around the mere men saw: *nicras licgean, / ða on undernmael oft bewitigad / sorfhulne sið on seglrade, / wyrmas ond wildeor* ‘Nicors lying, those that in the morning often watch a sorrowful journey on the sail-road, snakes and wild beasts’ (*Beowulf* 1427–9). Another watching *wyrm* in *Beowulf* is the climactic dragon, which *hord beweotode* ‘watched over a hoard’ (2212). Another watching ‘wolf’ is *Beowulf*, who stayed awake for Grendel’s arrival in Heorot.
With regard to this last point (e), a key detail which has obscured these two characters’ similarities from scholars is the ostensible difference between their locations: ‘the old one’ lived in Járnvíðr ‘Iron-Wood/Forest’, whereas Grendel’s mother inhabited a marshy mere. The two places are, however, reconcilable.

The hellish mere inhabited by Grendel’s mother has many unnerving aspects, which together create its phantasmagoric horror. Part inland sea, part turbulent, grasping whirlpool, it is also part wooded fen. Indeed, the fenny, marshy aspect of her environs is prominent. Thus, her dygel lond ‘secret/hidden land’ (1357) included moras … fen ond fæsten ‘moors … fen and fastness’ (103–4), fenhopu ‘fen-retreats’ (764), fenhleðu ‘fen-slopes’ (820), a fenfreðu ‘fen-refuge’ (851), fenne ‘fen’ (1295), a frecne fengelad ‘dangerous fen-passage’ (1359), myrcan mor ‘mirky moor’ (1405) and enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad ‘narrow paths restricted to a single file, an unknown [i.e., untried] treacherous passage across water’ (1410). Its wooded nature is also emphasized: it was overhung by hrinde bearwas ‘hoar-frosted groves’ (1363), a wudu wyrtum fæst ‘a wood fixed by roots’ (1364), and associated with a holtwudu ‘copse-wood’ (1369), a fyrgenholt ‘mountain-copse’ (1395), fyrgenbeamas ‘mountain-trees’ (1414) and a wynlesne wudu ‘joyless wood’ (1416). Additionally, it was the site of an eerie nocturnal fire strongly suggestive of ignis fatuus, a will-o’-the-wisp (1365–6), a phenomenon of marshes often said to be bluish. In short, Grendel’s mother inhabited one of Denmark’s wooded bogs.

So too, most likely, did ‘the old one’ of Járnvíðr.189 Járnvíðr was probably the name of a carr, a wooded bog, from which bog ore was extracted.190 In Iron Age Scandinavia, most iron derived from bog ore (ON rauði, literally ‘red (stuff)’),191 which is typically found in peat bogs.

---

189 Note also the presence of Járnvíðja beside Ímgerðr and Margerðr in a list of the names of troll-women in SnEskáld, I, 112.


191 On this word, see CV and D. H. Green, Language and History in the Early Germanic World (Cambridge, 1998), 154–5.
and, to a lesser extent, in rivers and lakes’. Consequently, a wooded bog might naturally have been called ‘Iron-Wood’. In Völuspá, Jarnviðr is presumably a mythological equivalent to, or elevation of, the real-world toponyms Jarnwith and Isarnho in Schleswig-Holstein. Such a bog might also have been a source of bog-wood, a rare form of fossilized wood. Its great hardness, attributable partly to iron in the water, perhaps encouraged both the place-name and the notion of the unbreakable twig-sword. Since trees overhung Grendel’s mere (ofer þæm hongiað ... oferhelmað 1363–4), branches and twigs would have fallen into its waters, as they did into the black water in the aforementioned Blickling homily. Sometimes, too, whole trees would have been lost to bogs. In addition, if there was a heavy concentration of iron in Grendel’s mere—the bottom of which concealed iron weaponry and armour—this could have turned its sucking waters reddish brown, so contributing to their pollution, prior to cleansing by Beowulf.

Furthermore, Beowulf’s repeated references to fen(n) ‘fen’ are suggestive of the mythological wolf Fenrir in Völuspá 40, to whose brood the lunar pitchforker belongs. The etymology of Fenrir is uncertain, but it probably contains the cognate ON fen, which would presumably make Fenrir a fen-dweller. Fenrisúlfr, the later-attested name for this monster, is explicable as a compound of ON fen ‘fen’ + hrís ‘brushwood’ + úlfr ‘wood’. Fenrir, it appears, is a wolf of fenland brushwood, and therefore at home in Jarnviðr.

I therefore propose that, to add to the potential correspondence between Beowulf’s niðdraca and Völuspá’s Niðhöggr, Grendel has a


194 OED attests to ‘ironwood’ denoting the extremely hard wood of various trees, but not before the mid-seventeenth century.

195 On the name Fenrir, see Simek, Dictionary, 81; ANEW s.v.; ÍO s.v.
likely counterpart in the ‘moon’s pitchforker’,\textsuperscript{196} and Grendel’s mother in ‘the old one’ of Jārnviðr in Vǫluspá. Concomitantly, both Grendel and the lunar pitchforker appear likely to be equivalent protagonists of myths about the taking of sunlight for a lunar giantess, personified respectively as ‘the old one’ and Grendel’s mother. Underlining the likely lunar nature of the pitchforker and Grendel is their apparent kinship, as sunlight-seizing fork-wielders, with the fork-bearing Man in the Moon.\textsuperscript{197}

Three further Old Norse saga-episodes appear noteworthy, as each involves what probably is, or was originally, a lunar forker. The first comes from a now-familiar source of neglected Beowulf-parallels: 

\textit{Hjálmpés saga}. 

\textbf{Ýma and the Boatforker}

In Chapter 7 of this study we left the adventures of the hero of \textit{Hjálmpés saga} at the point where his formidable companion Hörðr—himself a Beowulf-analogue—had killed all nine sisters of the troll-woman Ýma ‘Embers’. What concerns us here is what happened next.

The end of chapter 12 describes how the men walked along the shore until Hjálmpèr spotted a house up on a cliff. They went inside and found a bed, a table and chairs, and a barrel, from which they drank. Once Hjálmpèr and Ölvir were off-guard, Hörðr went out and locked them inside. Hjálmpèr shouted accusations of betrayal (wrongly) and tried to cut his way out with Snarvendill, but the marvellous sword would not bite. So the captives sat quietly inside.

Chapter 13 records that Hörðr walked further along the shore. He saw a large rock í fjörunni ‘on the foreshore’ (or ‘in the ebb-tide’) and got up on to it:

\begin{quote}
Hann litast um ok sér, hvar risi einn ógnarligr kom fram á bjargit ok var eigi sveinsligr yfirlits, því at engan þóttist hann slikan sét hafa sakir stórskorins
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{196} This is not to say that Grendel’s severed arm is imagined as a pitchfork. As likely counterparts, the similar but different forked tools of these two monsters rather reflect the capacity of myth to combine diachronic continuity with synchronic variation.

\textsuperscript{197} In the Middle English poem ‘The Man in the Moon’, the Man bears his burden on a \textit{bot-forde} ‘boatfork’ (2) (see below) and leans on a \textit{forke} ‘fork’ (19).
höfuðs. Hann hafði háva stöng í hendi ok fleið tvíeggjaðan, fjögurra álna langan. Hann tók niðr at fjörunni, þá hann stóð á bjarginu.\footnote{FSN, IV, 211.}

He looks around himself and sees where a terrible giant came forward onto the cliff, and he was not boyish in appearance, because he [i.e., Hörðr] thought he had never seen the like when it came to [the giant’s] large-boned head. He [i.e., the giant] had a tall pole in his hand and a two-edged spike (stuck) out from it, four ells long. He extended it down to the foreshore/ebb-tide when he stood on the cliff.

The giant, who is anonymous in the saga but called Skrimnir in the corresponding \textit{rima},\footnote{It will be recalled that Skrimnir is the husband of Mána ‘Moon’ in \textit{Sörla saga sterka}, and that his name might indicate a weak light.} asks who has killed his young girls (i.e., Ýma’s sisters). Hörðr says he did and asks for the giant’s protection. They converse and Hörðr asks him to lower the forked pole, so that he can grab it. The giant replies that he can easily do that because he has previously driven its point through ships and dragged them up to his position. What is effectively a tug-of-war ensues, with the giant heaving upwards at one end of the pole and Hörðr desperately resisting on the other. At length, \textit{jötunninn ‘the giant’ slapp ‘slipped’} and fell back. Hörðr then fooled him into stretching his neck out over the cliff and extending the pole again, whereupon Hörðr seized it and pulled the giant off the cliff, breaking all his bones. Hörðr then ran up the cliff and came to a large cave. Ýma was there and begged for her life, which Hörðr granted. He put her in charge of the cave, which contained the giant’s treasures, from which he took some gold. She told him to call on her if he ever needed help.

As the father of the nine sisters who may well personify waves, the unnamed giant may well correspond to Ægir/Gymir. As the giant is also the father of Ýma (the likely double of Margerðr), this would strengthen her correspondence to Gerðr, daughter of Gymir.

Hörðr’s tussle with the unnamed giant echoes, I suggest, Beowulf’s arm-wrestle with Grendel. The former giant’s huge pole—evidently a boathook with a bifurcated head comprising one straight and one curved prong (its twin ‘edges’)—corresponds broadly, in my view, to Grendel’s arm and hand with nails like steel. Rather as Beowulf engages in a furious bout of arm-wrestling that causes Grendel’s death by
separating him from his forked arm, so Hördr struggles with the giant, takes control of his forked pole and thereby kills him.

The saga-giant’s boathook, like Grendel’s arm, is probably also a counterpart of the Man in the Moon’s fork. As the saga-giant is both a stander and a walker who catches and lifts wooden ships on his boathook, so in the Middle English Mon in the mone:

Mon in the mone stond and strit;
On his bot-forke his burthen he bereth. (1–2)\textsuperscript{200}

The Man in the Moon stands and strides; on his boatfork\textsuperscript{201} his burden he bears.

This precise parallel is reinforced by the observation that both saga-giant and Man use their boatforks to steal wood, albeit in different ways.

Consequently, the saga-giant himself appears to correspond to the Man in the Moon.\textsuperscript{202} For her part, his wolfish daughter may relate to the Man’s dog. This identification of the unnamed giant can explain:

(a) The saga-episode’s cliff, as the moon appears to have low-lying seas.

(b) The giant’s close link with the sea and its ebb-tide, which the moon commands.

(c) The giant’s fathering of nine ship-destroying sisters, assuming they personify waves, as the moon governs the tides.

(d) The giant’s remarkably large-boned head; compare the monster called Quasi Caput Luna and my remarks on Grendel’s huge and extraordinary head at the end of this chapter.

(e) The dead giant’s falling into the sea; compare the submergence of the dead Moon in the waters of the pool in The Dead Moon, and (if his dark lunar aspect is accepted) Grendel’s presence in the depths of a Hell-like mere.

\textsuperscript{200} Davies, Medieval English Lyrics, 71.
\textsuperscript{201} Assuming this interpretation is correct, MED’s entry for bot-forke, ‘a fork or forked stick for carrying a bundle of thorns, etc. [?From bot (vr. of bat) club; ?from butte bundle.],’ needs revision.
\textsuperscript{202} Whether he or Grendel stands in any relationship to the mythological background of OE garsecg ‘ocean’—literally perhaps ‘spear-man’—is unknown.
This same identification also reveals humour in the giant’s slipping, as the Middle English poem continues: *It is muche wonder that he na down slit ‘It’s a great wonder that he doesn’t slip down’ (3). In the saga, he does!*203

Ýma and her father probably also correspond, albeit inexactly, to ‘the old one’ and the ‘moon’s pitchforker’ of *Völnspá*. That Ýma is here the forker’s newly deflowered daughter is an obvious variance (Gerðr is similarly Gymir’s daughter), but a switch to put the male in charge of the female would not be surprising and, in any case, the difference does not override the similarities. Rather as ‘the old one’ gave birth to Fenrir’s brood, so Ýma has a grey beast (probably a wolf) between her legs204—a wolf, furthermore, which is temporarily stretched by a sword that similarly conferred both pleasure and pain, as was Fenrir. The greyness of Ýma’s wolf-hair is also suggestive of the age of ‘the old one’. And rather as the *Völnspá*’s trollish pitchforker probably stole sunlight (from a solar barque?)205 on his fork, quite likely for ‘the old one’ (a probable moon-giantess), so the saga’s boatforker seized ships (solar barques?) on his boathook, presumably at least partly to provide for Ýma.

The likely relevance of Ýma (Íma) and the giant to ‘the old one’ and her lunar pitchforker is further shown by a variant of *Völnspá* 40 preserved in the Uppsala manuscript of Snorri’s *Prose Edda*.206 Instead of the idiom *einna nǫkkur* ‘a certain (notable) one’, which refers to a masculine character, this manuscript has *Íma nǫkkur* ‘a certain Íma’, in which nǫkkur is grammatically feminine. Like the same text’s *tregari* ‘griever’ in place of *tjúgari*, this is an inferior reading, but an informative one.

Finally, Ýma’s apparent origin as a lunar giantess may explain characteristics of her pre-eminent sister (and likely double) Margerðr, and therefore, by extension, Gerðr. As noted earlier, Margerðr was a hunchback with a single eye in the middle of her forehead—qualities which suggest to me the moon in its gibbous phase (Latin *gibbus*...
‘humped’), another personification of which we shall encounter below in the form of a male hunchback called Kolr.

Two More Male Forkers and a Sword of Lunar Waning

King Dagr and the Hayforker

Chapter 18 of Ynglinga saga records the strange death of King Dagr ‘Day’, a worshipper and likely euhemerization of Freyr. He waged a vengeful war on Gotland (Jutland) after a karl ‘common/old man’—perhaps Óðinn, who adopts this disguise elsewhere—of that country had stoned a sparrow which fed on his land á Vǫrva (probably originally ‘at the *vǫr “shore”’). This bird used to bring Dagr news of many things. As evening fell, Dagr was riding across a river on his way back to his ships when a verkþræll ‘work-slave’ (Óðinn again?) ran from a wood onto the riverbank and hurled a heytjúga ‘hayfork’ into the king’s company. It hit Dagr in the head, killing him. An accompanying stanza from Þjóðólfr of Hvinir’s possibly ninth-century Ynglingatal ‘Tally of the Ynglingar’ calls Dagr the valteins … spakfrómuðr ‘wise-advancer of the slaughter-twig’ (i.e., the sword and/or a sacrificial twig of divination). It also describes the hayfork, which was aimed at Dagr, as the słönguþref sleipnis verðar ‘slung-grasp of Sleipnir’s meal’. As Sleipnir was Óðinn’s horse, this may implicate Óðinn in the killing.

This episode contains no parallel to the old giantess of Völuspá, but it does feature a murderous pitchforker who kills a personification of day, which is defined by sunlight. He invites comparison with the lunar pitchforker of Völuspá, the Man in the Moon (similarly a low-status workman), and the giant with the boathook in Hjálmpés saga. Here the slave may be seen piercing the incarnate sun-god with a forked weapon, perhaps taken from the wood from which he emerged (possibly the

---


208 Cf. Lokasenna 44, in which Byggvir is disparagingly likened to such a bird at Freyr’s ears.

209 Óðinn hurls a spear (or other weapon) into a host of Vanir in Völuspá 24.

210 Rather as the giant of Hjálmpés saga pierced boats on his fork while standing at the coast, so, it may be, the slave stood on the riverbank to pierce Dagr in the water.
wood of heaven,\textsuperscript{211} or the world-tree). By killing Dagr with a grasping fork, he implicitly stole the last of the evening sun’s light, thereby bringing day to an end.

**Kolr the Gibbous, His Fork-Wielding Son and the Sword Angrvaðill**

Details strongly suggestive of lunar and solar mythology appear in the Old Norse \textit{Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar} ‘Saga of Þórsteinn, son of Víkingr’. This has been called a ‘fantastic and incoherent’ work,\textsuperscript{212} which was probably written around 1300.\textsuperscript{213} The following discussion may make parts of it appear less incoherent.

Chapter 3 of the saga introduces an evil character called Kolr, a name probably derived from ON \textit{kol} ‘coals’ but also suggestive of \textit{kollr} ‘head’:

\begin{quote}
Pann mann er at nefna til sögunnar, er Kolr hét. Mart gott er af honum at segja, þat fyrst, at hann var stórr sem jötunn, ljótr sem fjándinn, ok svá fjölkunnigr, at h... 
\end{quote}

That man is to be named for (the purpose of) the saga who is called Kolr. Many a good thing is to be said about him.\textsuperscript{215} First that he was big as a giant, ugly as the Devil, and so knowledgeable about sorcery that he travelled in earth and on it, and he glued together a stud/studs (of horses) and stars. He was such a great skin-changer that he quickly turned into various living forms. He went about variously with winds or in the sea. He had such a great ring on his shoulders that, if he stood upright, he carried the hunch higher than the head.

The chapter continues by recording, among other things, that Kolr, who had conquered India and become its king, was called \textit{kroppinbakk}.

\textsuperscript{211} On this concept, see Chapter 16.
\textsuperscript{212} M. Schlauch, \textit{Romance in Iceland} (London, 1934), 37.
\textsuperscript{213} For a study of this saga in the context of one manuscript, see E. Lethbridge, ‘The Place of \textit{Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar} in Eggertsbók, a Late Medieval Icelandic Saga-Book’, in A. Lassen, A. Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (ed.), \textit{The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development} (Reykjavík, 2012), 375–403.
\textsuperscript{214} FSN, III, 6–7; Rafn, \textit{Fornaldar sögur}, II, 389–90.
\textsuperscript{215} An ironic statement.
‘hunchback’. He owned three treasures. The first was a sword called *Angrvaðíll* (I venture a translation of this name below), which was *svá góðr gripr, at ekki var betra borit í þann tíma* ‘such a good treasure that no better was carried at that time’. The second was a *gullhríngr* ‘gold ring’ called *Glæsir* ‘Shining One’. The third was a drinking horn with the nasty property of inflicting leprosy and forgetfulness on those who drank from its lower half, and only curing those who drank from its upper half—thereby ensuring the cure was wasted on anyone who drank deeply! Kolr, it appears, was both a niggard and a cruel spreader of disease and mental illness.

Later in the same chapter we learn that:

*Kolr kroppinbakr lét seiða til þess, at ekki vápn skyldi at bana verða öllu hans afsprengi utan sverðit Angrvaðíll. Ekki járn bítr þau annat.*  

En þá Kolr var fullgamall, dó hann illum dauða.

Kolr the hunchback had *seiðr* [i.e., a form of feminine magic] worked to this end, that no weapon should be the death of all his offspring, except the sword *Angrvaðíll*. No other iron bites them.

And when Kolr was very old, he died a bad death.

We learn no more about Kolr’s death, so we cannot tell whether he also died by *Angrvaðíll*. However, one detail which immediately catches the eye is Kolr’s peculiar gluing (with lime) of stars to stud-horses, which, judging from the s-alliteration, might derive from a lost poem. Given Kolr’s evil looks, knowledge of sorcery and possessive nature, it probably identifies him as a snatcher of stars, which he attached to horses. Whether the equines were heavenly or terrestrial is unknown. Perhaps Kolr stole stars simply by attaching them to horses, though the use of glue for this purpose, rather than a harness, would be odd. I therefore suggest that he rather stole stars and glued them to the *foreheads* of terrestrial horses, who then became especially prized.

We have already encountered a likely star-thief in this study:
the Man in the Moon on the seal of Walter de Grendon.220 Although, to my knowledge, the Man is nowhere described gluing stars to horses, he and the other hunters of celestial light that we have encountered encourage the suspicion that Kolr the hunchback was once the gibbous moon. This suspicion strengthens in light of a Modern Icelandic word for a horse with a white blaze on its forehead: glámur, the same word as ON glámr ‘moon’;221 if a horse could have a moon on its forehead, it is no great stretch of the imagination to envisage the same idea extended to a star. Furthermore, there is the curious detail of the ‘great ring’ on Kolr’s shoulders. We might rationalize this simply as a severe spinal curvature.222 It would be so extreme, however, that I suggest it was originally not distinct from Kolr’s implicitly shining gold ring; it may be interpretable as a memory of the moon, or the stolen sun, shining where his head ought to be,223 or (like some other rings encountered in this study) of an annular solar eclipse.

There is also the name of Kolr’s outstanding sword, Angrvaðill, to consider. The first element of this compound is probably ON angr ‘grief, sorrow, trouble, affliction’. The second element, -vaðill, has previously been translated ‘wader’,224 but, especially given Kolr’s other potentially lunar attributes, I would relate it rather to OE waðol, which I earlier proposed is a forerunner of the obsolete English dialect noun ‘waddle’, a term for the moon’s wane. It would make excellent sense for offspring of a lunar character to die by a remarkable sword called ‘Grief-Wane’, which, since it was peerless and no doubt stolen, is likely to have been a weapon of heavenly light—we shall shortly find that it was, indeed, radiant.

Additionally, if Kolr were originally the moon, this could explain the actions and attributes of one of his sons, Hárekr jarnhauss ‘Irons kull’, who is introduced in chapter 2. There we read of a Swedish king called Hringr ‘Ring’ whose daughter, Húnvör ‘Hun(?)-Goddess’, was the fairest and most accomplished of women, but so arrogant that she had

---

220 See Chapter 10 above.
221 PTP, 913.
222 As assumed in B. Waggoner (trans.), The Sagas of Fridþjóf the Bold (New Haven, 2009), 6.
223 Recall Quasi Caput Luna; also the vessel of sunlight between the horns of the lunar thief in Riddle 29.
224 PTP, 796–7 (–vaðill would then relate to ON vada ‘to wade’); cf. ibid., 800–1 for the ‘sword’-term hrævaðr, explained as ‘one who wades through corpses’. Other possible translations of Angrvaðill are ‘Grief- Shallows’ and ‘Firth-Shallows’.
refused all offers of marriage. One day, there came over the impassable mountain behind Hringr’s settlement einn maðr, ef mann skyldi kalla ‘a man, if you could call him a man’; he was bigger and more hideous than anything people had seen before—líkari jötni en mennskum manni ‘more like a giant [jötnum] than a human being’, and he held in his hand a flein tvíoddadan ‘two-pointed pike’.225 He asked to enter the king’s hall, but the guards refused him access, whereupon he stabbed them with his pike, so that either point skewered one of them. He heaved them over his head and threw their lifeless bodies to the ground a long way off. He then entered the hall and approached the king. He introduced himself and requested Húnvör in marriage—or else he would kill the king, seize his kingdom and take Húnvör as concubine. Húnvör refused his offer, but Hárekr agreed to stake everything on a duel against Hringr or one of his men. His opponent turned out to be a certain Vikingr ‘Viking’, whose father had given him Angrvaðill after taking it from another of Kolr’s sons.226

Chapter 4 records that, on the day of the duel, Hárekr was unimpressed by his foe. He declared he could kill Vikingr just by punching him with his fist (hnefi),227 but he did not get the chance. Vikingr drew Angrvaðill, ok var því líkt sem elding brygði af honum ‘and at that moment it was as if lightning sprang from it’; the sword cut Hárekr in two, its blade running on into the ground allt at hjöltum ‘all the way to the hilt’.228 Later, in chapter 7, Vikingr marries Húnvör.

Behind the giant-man Hárekr, and his two-pronged pike,229 may lie the myth of the moon’s forker of the sun, traces of which may survive in at least some of the saga’s various ‘rings’.230 It will also be observed that

225 FSN, III, 3; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 386. A variant reading is flein tvíangaðan ‘two-forked pike’.
226 Vikingr had the pedigree to wield a radiant sword. His mother was Eimyrja ‘Embers’, sister of Eisa ‘(Glowing) Embers’. Their mother was Glöð ‘Glad’ (but probably better Glóð ‘Red-Hot Embers’), wife of the giant Hálogi ‘High Flame’, who was originally simply Logi ‘Flame’.
227 FSN, III, 9; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 393.
228 FSN, III, 10; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 393.
229 It is later called a kesju forna ‘old kesja [some type of halberd]’, which, it was thought, no man could wield because of its weight (FSN, III, 25; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 409), and kesjufléiminn Háreksnaut ‘the kesju-pike Hárekr’s Gift’ (FSN, III, 35; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 419).
230 Note that Hárekr inherits the ring Glæsir. It is also of interest that his sister, a troll-woman called Dis ‘Supernatural Lady’, masquerades as Sólhbjör ‘Sun-Bright’ to entrap Vikingr in chapter 5.
 Hárekr recalls Grendel, as does Kolr in some respects. Hárekr may not be a man-eater, but he too was an evil man-giant magically immune to all but one marvellous and radiant sword. He too invaded a Scandinavian king’s hall and killed his men. And he too used (or threatened to use) his hand as a mortal weapon.

Angrvaðill parallels the giant sword in multiple respects. Both are:

(a) Peerless.

(b) Radiant with heavenly light. Although the former’s light may appear fulgural, rather than solar, it may be noted that one Old Norse term for ‘lightning’, leiptr, was also a term for the sun.\(^{231}\)

(c) Unfailingly victorious: the giant sword is sigeeadig ‘victory-eager’ (Beowulf 1557); of Angrvaðill it was said that ‘hefar jafnan fylgt því sigr’ “victory has always accompanied it”.\(^{232}\)

(d) Dispatchers of a man-giant who wielded a large fork or similar weapon in a single blow.

(e) Formerly the possession of an evil parent (in both cases probably lunar) of the fork-wielding man-giant whom they destroy (assuming the giant sword is guarded by Grendel’s mother).

(f) Deprived in some way (albeit very differently) of their blades when dispatching this monster, leaving only their hilt as the focus of attention. Whereas Angrvaðill’s blade sank merely sank wholly into the ground, the giant sword’s blade entirely melted.\(^{233}\)

(g) Bringers of a terminal wane in destroying the (probably lunar) man-giant. In addition, the giant sword itself wanes (though Angrvaðill does not).

Angrvaðill also features prominently later in the saga in a suggestive episode. By then, it had passed to Vikingr’s son, Þorsteinn, the oldest, biggest and strongest of nine brothers. In chapter 19 we read that one

\(^{231}\) PTP, 910.

\(^{232}\) FSN, III, 25; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 409.

\(^{233}\) Cf. the sword of Járnskjöldr mentioned earlier in this chapter.
day, Þorsteinn’s ship was destroyed in a magical storm sent by his foes. Þorsteinn managed to swim almost to shore, but was being drawn under when, in the nick of time, he saw an old woman, störskorin mjök ok heldr grepplig í ásjónu ‘very large-boned and rather ugly in appearance’, wearing a skin-cloak. She was wading towards him. She snatched him from the water, identified herself as Skellnefja ‘Rattle(?) Nose’, and offered him his life, if he would do one thing for her. After bringing him ashore, sló hun þá á við hann glímu nokkuri, þar til honum gerði heitt ‘she then set to somewhat of a wrestling-match with him, until he became hot’. Subsequently, Þorsteinn was attacked by an arrogant man called Jökull ‘Icicle/Ice/Glacier’ and the exhausted Þorsteinn toppled off a riverbank. Jökull left him for dead. In the fall, Angrvaðill hraut ór hendi honum ok ofan í móðuna ‘flew from his hand down into the large river (of muddy water)’, but Þorsteinn landed on a grassy spot, where he lay milli heims ok heljar ‘between the (living) world and Hel’. He expected only death, but again the hideous Skellnefja came to save him. This time she named her price: he must agree to marry her. He reluctantly agreed, on condition that she get his sword. She then carried him to a large cave (in chapter 17 said to be við Djúpamóðu ‘by Djúpamóða “Deep (Muddy) River”’), where he was healed within a week. And one day, um kveldit kom hún aftr með sverðit, ok var þá vott mjök ‘during the evening she came back [i.e., to the cave] with the sword, and it was then very wet’. She gave it to him and revealed that her real name was Ingibjorg. She was a princess who had been bewitched, but Þorsteinn’s agreement to marry her had broken the spell, returning her to her beautiful, youthful self. She added the request that Þorsteinn spare the life of her brother, Beli, which he did after getting the better of him in battle; they become sworn-brothers.

In addition to showing similarities to texts already mentioned, this episode’s account of Angrvaðill falling into water, from which it is later recovered, parallels a tradition about the sword Mistilteinn treated

---

234 FSN, III, 50; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 435; cf. Skinnhúfa ‘Skin-Hood’ in Hjálmpes saga.
235 FSN, III, 50–51; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 435.
236 In chapter 25 of the saga, the two meet again. Þorsteinn severs Jökull’s arm with Angrvaðill, causing him to be known as Jökull inn einhendi ‘the One-Handed’ thereafter.
237 FSN, III, 52; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 435.
238 FSN, III, 53; Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, II, 438.
in Chapter 15 of this study. Potentially important, too, is the name of Þorsteinn’s saviour, Ingibjörg ‘Ingi-Help/Deliverance’. Although this is not an uncommon name, we may wonder whether it is a clue that Ing(i), rather than Þorsteinn, was the episode’s original protagonist, and that it was formerly his radiant, moon-slaying sword which was lost to, and recovered from, water.

Anger, Death and the Dismembered Moon

Further significant congruences exist between Grendel and his mother and traditions about the moon in world mythology. In this section I briefly treat each in turn.

As one scholar of lunar myths observes, Greek men ‘moon’ is ‘also the root of the verb “to be angry”, “to rage”, menaio’, on which basis she raises the possibility that there was once a link between the moon and rage. Grendel, who Godes yrre bær ‘bore God’s ire’ (711), was explicitly yrremod ‘angry in spirit’ (726), yrre ‘angry’ (769, 2073), and his reign of terror appears motivated primarily by jealous rage at the light and merriment of Heorot (Beowulf 86–9). Also, his dismemberment (see below) caused his mother’s vengeful visit to the same hall.

Especially when waning or dark, the moon is often imagined as a bringer of death, a kidnapper, killer and devourer of men. Earlier, Ingibjörg is also the name of a maid of Hringr’s daughter Húnvör, of whom she seems almost a double. In the same saga a daughter of Beli is also called Ingibjörg. Additionally, chapter 25 records that Þorsteinn had a daughter called Véfreyja ‘House/Temple/Standard/Priest/Woe Freyja’, whom Skellnefja/Ingibjörg conceived and raised in the cave. She received Angrvaðill after her father.

Additionally, chapter 23 of the saga contains parallels to Beowulf’s encounter with Grendel’s mother; Lethbridge, ‘Place’, 395–6. Þorsteinn wrestles in the sea with a whale-like, sword-resistant man called Ötunfaxi ‘Unclean Mane’, who drags him to the bottom. He is saved only by the intervention of a dwarf called Sindri ‘Cindery’, with whose knife Þorsteinn guts Ötunfaxi (Þorsteinn received this knife after giving Sindri’s daughter a gold ring; compare Vilhjálmr’s similar exchange in Sigurðar saga þǫglu, discussed in Chapter 12, and an exchange in Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar bersekbana, FSN, III, 348). At the surface, Þorsteinn’s companions see blood and entrails in the water and assume he is dead.

The climactic dragon, the niðdraca, is also yrre ‘angry’ (2669). So, too, though, is Beowulf.

For examples from around the world, see Cashford, Moon, 309–12. In addition, the Norse Máni was apparently a kidnapper. Gylfaginning records (SnEgylf, 14): ‘Máni stýrir tungls ok raðr nýjum ok niðum. Hann tók tvau börn af jórðunni, er svá heita: Bil ok
stole and ate men. His mother presumably also ate them. She made off with Æschere’s body, leaving only his head behind.

The moon’s waning is often imagined as a dismemberment or beheading, sometimes inflicted by a thunder-god but usually by a sun-god using a knife (or knives) or a sword. Beowulf, adopted champion of the friends of Ing and defender of their sun-like hall, initially dismembered Grendel by hand—and, as noted earlier, the poet’s wordplay may implicitly link Grendel’s wani(ge)an ‘bewailing’ of his pain to the wanian ‘waning’ of the moon. Beowulf later beheaded both Grendel and his mother with a sun-like sword. In Grendel’s case, therefore, his wane was progressive, as is the moon’s.

The moon’s apparent death by waning may result from a curse. Grendel and his mother were both cursed as descendants of Cain, a figure traditionally associated with the moon.

The dark moon is sometimes imagined to be resting or sleeping in the underworld. Beowulf found the one-armed Grendel on ræste …

_Hjúki, er þau gengu frá brunni þeim er Byrgir heitir, ok báru á ǫxlum sér sá er heitir Sœgr, en stöngin Simul. Viðfinn er nefndr faðir þeira. Þessi þorn fylgja Mána, svá sem sjá má af þóðu._ ‘Máni steers the moon and controls its waxings and wanings. He took two children from the earth, who are called thus: Bil ‘Failure/Empty Space’ and Hjúki [cf. CV s.v. _hjúka_ ‘to nurse, cherish (a baby, a sick person)’], when they were walking from the well called Byrgir ‘Hider’, and they bear on their shoulders the tub called Sœgr ‘Sleet, Wet, Rain’, and the pole Simul ‘Ever’. Their father is called Viðfinn ‘Wood/Wide-Finn’. These children accompany Máni, just as one can see from Earth.’ For discussion, see Simek, _Dictionary_, 201–2; A. Holtsmark, ‘Bil og Hjuke’, _Maal og minne_ (1945), 139–54; ‘Hjúki and Bil’, in _Wikipedia_ (13 November 2018), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hj%C3%Buki_and_Bil

244 Cashford, _Moon_, 315–20; Krupp, _Beyond the Blue Horizon_, 57–60; S. Milbrath, ‘Decapitated Lunar Goddesses in Aztec Art, Myth, and Ritual’, _Ancient Mesoamerica_ 8 (1997), 185–206. Perhaps such a tradition relates to the myth of the Anglo-Saxon god Woden using nine _waldortanas_ ‘brilliant twigs’ (compare Óðinn with his single _gambanteinn_?) a snake into nine parts in the Old English _Nine Herbs Charm_ (the incantation section of which uses the verb (wið)stunian ‘to make a loud noise (against)’ of certain plants). R. H. Bremmer Jr., ‘Hermes-Mercury and Woden-Odin as Inventors of Alphabets: A Neglected Parallel’, in A. Bammesberger (ed.), _Old English Runes and their Continental Background_ (Heidelberg, 1991), 409–19 at 415 rejects the traditional interpretation of these twigs as magical, viewing them rather as actual weapons, whether rods or swords (compare the twig-swords examined in the present study).


246 Cashford, _Moon_, 334. Cf. _Der Mond_ and _The Dead Moon_ above; recall, too, Skjaldvör’s being put to sleep, her yawning, and the drowsiness of Járnskjöldr.
The Waning Sword

The parallels between Grendel, the monster called Quasi Caput Luna in Wonders, Glámr in Grettis saga and the boatforker of Hjálmþés saga encourage the idea that Grendel had a lunar aspect focused on his head. If he did, this lends additional significance to Beowulf’s decision to bring Grendel’s head to Heorot, along with the giant sword (and Hrunting). On one level, Beowulf probably brings Grendel’s head simply as proof that he has finally destroyed the vampiric monster; on another, he does so ‘in requital for Æschere’s head’. But there is probably still more to the head’s arrival in Heorot.

Grendel’s hafelan heorodreorigne ‘sword-bloody head’ (1780) and the giant sword’s hilt, which Beowulf describes together as sælac ‘sea-offerings/sacrifices/gifts/medicines/booty’ (1624, 1652) and as serving tires to tacne ‘as a sign of glory’ (1654), have more than a destination in common. Both are:

247 See Cashford, Moon, 337–9. This widespread belief suggests that the concluding image of Niðhöggr ascending with corpses in its wings in Völuspá 66 may signify the resurrection of virtuous humans from the dead, so that they may live in the golden hall of Gimlé, which is sólu fegra ‘fairer than the sun’ (64).
249 This instance (emended and discussed in KB) may also pun on ‘sea-battles’.
(a) Severed heads. The hilt, which is all that remains of the giant sword when brought to Heorot, is effectively that weapon’s head. Compare the Langeid sword, for instance.

(b) Incomparably huge. Grendel’s head was so enormous that it took four men to bring it to Heorot, possibly with two at either end of the \textit{wælsteng} ‘slaughter-pole’ that transfixed it (1634–9);\footnote{Owen-Crocker, ‘Horror in \textit{Beowulf}’, 88 n. 8.} compare the uniquely large-boned head of the lunar giant with the boatfork in \textit{Hjalmpés saga}. As the giant sword was the largest, heaviest sword, which only Beowulf (of humans) could wield, its ‘head’ must also have been immense.

(c) ‘Marked’ objects on which men gazed in wonder.

With regard to the third point, in \textit{Beowulf} we hear of the giant’s head that:

\begin{verbatim}
þa wæs be feaxe   on flet boren
Grendles heafod   þær guman druncon—
egeslic for eorlum   ond þære idese mid,
wliteseon wrætlic;  weras on sawon. (1647–50)
\end{verbatim}

Then Grendel’s head was carried by the hair onto the floor where men were drinking—terrible for noblemen and for the lady with them, a marked spectacle; men looked upon it.

This translation does not, I think, do full justice to the description’s subtlety. Grendel’s head was certainly ‘terrible’ (\textit{egeslic}) to behold—and when alive had emitted an unpleasant fiery light from its eyes—but it was also ‘awesome’ (\textit{ege} ‘awe’) and one \textit{maðmahta} ‘of the treasures’ (1613) that Beowulf took. It was undoubtedly a ‘spectacle’, but the unique compound \textit{wliteseon} suggests more than that. It contains a simple pun on ‘face-sight’ (cf. \textit{wlita} and \textit{andwlite} ‘face’), but, more intriguingly, other instances of \textit{wlite} and related Old English words denote, or are associated with, beauty and impressive looks. For example, in \textit{Beowulf} the earth is \textit{wlitebeorhtne} ‘beautifully bright’ (93), the Danish coastguard is impressed by Beowulf’s \textit{wlite}, his \textit{ænlic ansyn} ‘unique form’ (250–1), and the giant sword is \textit{wlittig} ‘beautiful’ (1662). If Grendel’s head had instead
been a *wlætseon ‘loathsome sight’, the sense would be unremarkable, but as it stands we may wonder whether *wliteseon hints at the marked (wrætlic)—that is, both outstanding and cratered or besmirched—wlite ‘beauty’ of the moon, the complement to its sinisterness.\textsuperscript{251} As observed in King Alfred’s *Metres of Boethius* (28):

\begin{verbatim}
Hwa is on weorulde þæt ne wundrige
fulles monan, þonne he færinga
wyrð under wolcnum wliteseon bereafad,
beþeaht mid þiostrum? (41–4)\textsuperscript{252}
\end{verbatim}

Who is there in the world who does not wonder at the full moon, when it suddenly becomes bereaved/robbed of beauty (wlites) under the clouds, covered over with darknesses?

That Grendel’s head, along with the hilt, serves as tires to tacne encourages the same thought, as not only is tir associated with torht ‘bright(ness)’ in Old English literature,\textsuperscript{253} but, in the *Old English Rune Poem*, Tir is a heavenly body, a tacna sum ‘notable sign’ which passes over the clouds of night, one which næfre swiceþ ‘never fails’.\textsuperscript{254}

For its part, the giant sword’s hilt, we have seen, was marked with runes and the subject of Hroðgar’s gaze.

If Grendel’s severed head intimates the defeated dark moon and the giant sword’s separated hilt intimates the victorious sun-Cross, Beowulf brings to Heorot symbols of the two chief heavenly bodies, about which a poet had earlier sung in that very hall (94–5). Furthermore, Beowulf’s offerings would closely parallel what we see in the Crucifixion/Doomsday scene on the Lindisfarne grave-marker: a blazing sun and a waned moon on either side of the hilt of a sword-like Cross which is beheld by men.\textsuperscript{255}

\textsuperscript{251} The term may also express the ‘inexpressible thrill of horror, a repulsion within an attraction’; Cohen, *Of Giants*, 64, 66–7.
\textsuperscript{252} Irvine and Godden, *Old English Boethius*, 340.
\textsuperscript{253} See quotations in BT s.v. tir, tir-eadig, tir-fæst.
\textsuperscript{254} Unlike Hrunting (see ecg geswac ‘the edge/sword failed’ 1524) and Nægling (guðbill geswac ‘the battle-bill failed’ 2584; geswac at sæcce ‘failed in battle’ 2681). Since the rune-inscribed hilt of the giant sword would be ‘T’-shaped, it might suggest the ð-rune, the name of which, Tir, relates to the heathen Anglo-Saxon god Tiw and to the Old Norse Tyr who lost a hand to Fenrir. Both gods seem to have been associated with swords; the ð-rune being inscribed on the pommels of at least two Anglo-Saxon examples; see R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2nd edn. (Woodbridge, 1999), 91–2.
\textsuperscript{255} See Chapter 4.