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

Edward Pettit
16. Conclusion

Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon Song of Ice and Fire

Having covered so much ground and drawn so many parallels between aspects of Beowulf’s mere-episode and other texts, in this final chapter I summarize the study’s main findings so far and tie up some loose ends. I also introduce important new evidence, make additional proposals and draw general conclusions about the significance of this study for the poem’s interpretation.

My starting point was the image of how the blade of an outstanding golden-hilted sword (called ‘the giant sword’ throughout this study), which the eponymous hero discovered in the depths of a Danish mere, began hildegicelum … wanian ‘with battle-icicles … to wane’ (1606–7), of how it eal gemealt ise gelicost ‘entirely melted most like ice’ (1608) in the heat of monstrous blood after beheading the two giants who lived there: Grendel’s mother and Grendel himself. This striking image appears at the centre of the poem and, in my view, has not been interpreted satisfactorily by previous scholars.

Evidence within Beowulf, together with external parallels in Old English, Old Norse and medieval Irish literature, suggests that this image may intimate more than one widely attested sword-metaphor. One such metaphor, common in Old Norse skaldic poetry, is of a sword as a weapon of ice, sometimes an icicle. However, although Norse texts often liken swords to ice and icicles, they never describe a sword melting with icicles or even like ice. Another such metaphor is of a sword as a burning, radiant candle, an object central to Christian ritual. Of special interest are parallels between the giant sword, which seems to have shone like the sun, rodores candel ‘the sky’s candle’ (1572), in the depths of the mere, and a sword called Snarvendill in Hjálmpís saga ok Ölvis, which is described
as a ‘corpse-candle’; this radiant sword is conferred on the saga’s hero, Hjálmpér, by a female monster called Vargeisa in an episode that looks analogous to Beowulf’s encounter with Grendel’s mother in the mere. Grendel’s mother may also have a parallel, albeit inexact, in a monstrous Norse female called Gryla, known from a variety of sources; she wields another noteworthy ‘candle’ in the form of a large icicle.

From a Christian perspective, the giant sword’s melting, which is compared to God’s thawing of the world’s ice in springtime, may be interpretable as an intimation of one or two key symbols of Easter. The giant sword, which we may reasonably infer is a prime source of the sun-like radiance which shone in the mere immediately after the beheading of Grendel’s mother, might evoke not just a candle but the large Paschal Candle. Especially once reduced to its cross-shaped hilt, it may also intimate the Cross of Christ. This would accord with other indications that Beowulf’s mere-episode evokes the Eastertide events of the Crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell, and of the sacrament of baptism. From this viewpoint, the giant sword is highly suggestive of the justice-dispensing weapon of the Judaeo-Christian God.

This, however, is only one of the perspectives required to appreciate the richness of the image of the waning, melting giant sword—and more generally the artistic achievement of Beowulf. In my view, we must also recognize the mere-episode’s affinities with the nature-mythology of early northwest Europe, especially Anglo-Saxon and Norse traditions about the sun and moon which are likely to have pre-Christian origins. Particularly relevant are traditions about the Scandinavian fertility god called Ingvi/Yngvi, more grandly Yngvi-Freyr, or often just Freyr ‘Lord’, a deity whose powers included control of the sun and the Earth’s produce. He is probably broadly equivalent to the remarkable personage known to Anglo-Saxons as Ing, whose name appears at least twice in Beowulf, most clearly in titles borne by Hroðgar, king of the Danes: eodor Ingwina ‘shelter of the Ing-friends’ (1044) and frea Ingwina ‘lord of the Ing-friends’ (1319).

These titles suggest a close connection between Hroðgar, his people and Ing. Ing is also linked with the early Danes, and possibly solar swords, by an ambiguous stanza from the Old English Rune Poem. This stanza may associate Ing with heavenly light by subtly identifying him as the constellation Boötes, alias the Ploughman, whose appearance
at night heralds the return of the warm sun in springtime; it possibly also identifies him with the diurnal sun. If so, this may indicate that Ing was once a fertility god who sowed his crops by night and grew them by day. The connection between Hroðgar and Ing/Yngvi-Freyr may be strengthened by the former’s repeated designation in *Beowulf* as *frea* ‘lord’, this word being the Old English cognate of ON *Freyr*. Hroðgar, bright lord of the shining hall *Heorot* ‘Hart’, and the bright god Freyr also share connections with the sun through the concept of the antlered solar hart and the weapons which they and their prime representatives wield.

A key source of information about Freyr and his weaponry is the Old Norse mythological poem *Fǫr Skírnis*. I hope to have shown how, in many respects, this Eddic poem parallels the mere-episode of *Beowulf*, and that these parallels are sufficiently numerous, non-trivial and sequential to suggest independent manifestations of a shared story-pattern. *Fǫr Skírnis* records that Freyr gave his marvellous sword to Skírnir, his servant and likely hypostasis, who had requested it if he was to win for his master the hand of a radiant giantess called Gerðr. It appears likely from *Fǫr Skírnis* and other Norse evidence that Gerðr and her father Gymir (alias the sea-giant Ægir) inhabited a land which was within, under or by the sea or another body of water. Other Norse episodes analogous to *Beowulf* similarly feature giantesses who live within or are found by water. Their evidence strengthens the possibility that the many parallels between *Fǫr Skírnis* and *Beowulf* exist because these texts contain variants of the same (or much the same) underlying myth. On this basis, the sword of Freyr and a second weapon wielded by Skírnir, the mysterious *gambanteinn* (about which more later), may represent counterparts of the two swords wielded by Beowulf during the mere-episode, namely Hrunting and the giant sword.

Subtle clues to the giant sword’s association with the mythology of Freyr may also be present in *Beowulf*. Shortly before Beowulf dives into the mere, the poem describes a stag-hunt in such a way as to hint at a shared identity between an antlered *heorot* ‘hart’ pursued by hounds, the hall *Heorot*, Hroðgar and the (antler-hilted?) giant sword which Beowulf will shortly discover in the mere. It may be relevant that Old Norse tradition records that Freyr killed a giant with a potentially solar antler which took the place of the sword he had given to Skírnir.
More obviously, it appears significant that, upon returning from the mere, Beowulf presents the giant sword’s hilt to Hroðgar, the frea of Heorot. The poet’s threefold description of this presentation indicates the sword’s great importance to the Danes. This scene offers no direct clues to the weapon’s identity, but its solemnity would suit the return of an ancestral sword—perhaps even a lost sword of Ing/Yngvi-Freyr himself—to its rightful inheritor, arguably the god’s earthly representative or incarnation. This return may find parallel in the Old Norse poem Sólarljóð’s description of the likely taking of a solar antler, inscribed with runes by Freyr’s sisters (possibly personifications of waves), from a dwarf. Furthermore, like the giant sword, the antler of Sólarljóð probably also symbolizes the Cross in an episode suggestive of the Harrowing of Hell.

Important too for an understanding of the giant sword and its possible connection to Freyr is the analogous Old Norse sword Mistilteinn ‘Mistiletote’. According to Hrómundar saga Gripssonar, it was acquired and reacquired in similar circumstances by Hrómundr, a hero comparable to Beowulf and the namesake of Hroðmund, Hroðgar’s son. Furthermore, in certain versions of Heiðreks saga, Mistilteinn is grouped with Hrotti, a likely Old Norse equivalent of Hunting, in a trinity of famous swords possessed by heroes: Angantýr had Tyrfingr, Hervarðr had Hrotti, and Sæmíngr/Semíngr had Mistilteinn. Here Hervarðr corresponds to OE Heoroweard, the son of Hroðgar’s elder brother Heorogar in Beowulf. Additionally, the less-than-transparent name of Mistilteinn’s owner, Sæmíngr/Semíngr (probably better Sæmingr), might be supposed, by folk-etymology at least, to have sæ ‘sea’ as its first element. If so, this

1 J. Köberl, ‘The Magic Sword in Beowulf’, Neophilologus 71 (1987), 120–8 argues that the giant sword had belonged to Heremod, the mighty Danish king of whom Hroðgar speaks after gazing at its hilt. The two proposals are not necessarily incompatible.
3 Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, I, 416, 515. In the concluding prose to the Eddic Fáfnismál ‘Lay of Fáfnir’ and in Völsunga saga (chapter 20), however, the hero Sigurðr takes Hrotti from the lair of the dead dragon Fáfnir.
4 It may also be noted that ON Hervarðr is not wholly dissimilar in sound to OE (H) unferð, the Dane who loaned Hunting to Beowulf.
5 He is identifiable with the Swedish King Semíngr whom Práïnn defeated in Hrómundar saga Gripssonar; cf. Rafn, Fornaldar sögur, I, 416. According to ANEW
might tie in with Mistilteinn’s recovery from water in Hrómundar saga. More importantly, according to Snorri’s prologue to Heimskringla, the poem Háleygjatal ‘Tally of the Háleygir [i.e., people of Hálogaland]’ by the tenth-century Norwegian Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnson named Sæmingr as the sonr Yngvifreys ‘son of Yngvi-Freyr’—although Snorri shortly afterwards contradicts this by identifying him, in Ynglinga saga, as the son of Óðinn and Skaði on the basis of a stanza quoted from the same poem. The fourteenth-century Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar ‘Saga of Hálfdan Eysteinsson’ also describes Sæmingr as Óðinn’s son, and adds that he married Nauma, a name encountered earlier in this study in association with an aquatic giantess in Grettis saga. If the prologue to Heimskringla is not simply wrong about Sæmingr’s paternity, given that further evidence suggests that Óðinn appropriated the roles of Freyr, we may say that, despite the discrepancy, we have some basis for linking Mistilteinn with Freyr’s close kin. In view of how much Mistilteinn has in common with Beowulf’s giant sword, this encourages an association of the latter weapon with the circle of Ing/Yngvi-Freyr. Additionally, among other evidence adduced earlier, we found that an analogous sword called Sigrljómi ‘Victory-Light’ was owned by Hrólfr, the Old Norse form of Hroðulf, Hroðgar’s nephew, and that likely counterparts of Hrunting and the giant sword were wielded by Skírnir, Freyr’s hypostasis.

s.v. Sæmingr and ÍO s.v. Sæmingur, Sémingr, the name probably means ‘Swaththy, Blackish’, being related to ON sámr; they consider doubtful an alternative appeal to words such as OHG samo and Latin semen ‘seed’, which would make Sæmingr a ‘Seed-Shoot’ (i.e., offspring of a seed-god?), although this could suit his possession of a twig-sword and (see shortly) his siring by the fertility god Yngvi-Freyr.

6 Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, I, 4.
7 Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, I, 21–2; Whaley, Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1, 199–200; the first of the two stanzas quoted in this context identifies Skaði as a (or the) járnviðja ‘inhabitant of Járniðr’, on which see Chapters 10 and 14 above. The Prologue to Snorri’s Prose Edda records that Óðinn proceeded north until he came to the encircling sea, where he installed his son, Sæmingr, over Norway; he then made another of his sons, Yngvi, king in Sweden; SnEGylf, 6. Sæmingr is also recorded as a theonym; PTP, 754, 757; SnESkáld, I, 113.
8 FSN, IV, 247.
9 See Chapter 8.
We appear, therefore, to have multiple grounds for linking a weapon such as the giant sword to Freyr and his circle. When we also recall that the Beowulf-analogue Þorsteinn uxafótr gave Ívarr ljómi (probably a late manifestation of Íng) an analogous sword taken from trollish counterparts of Grendel and his mother, it requires no great leap of faith to conclude that Mistilteinn and the giant sword may once have been possessions of Íng/Yngvi-Freyr. Nor does it require a huge imaginative leap to envisage the giant sword as an ancestral heirloom of the Danes, especially as narratives involving a ‘hero (in this case Beowulf) with two swords’, one of which is often a family weapon, are a common feature of Norse sagas. Indeed, it is hard to think otherwise when the *Beowulf*-poet identifies the hilt, at the very moment Hroðgar gazes on it, as an old *laf* ‘leaving/heirloom’ (1688), one that had *on æht gehwearf ... Denigea frean* ‘returned(?) into the possession of the *freo* of the Danes’ (1679–80).

If the giant sword was, from a Germanic perspective, once a weapon of the pagan god Íng/Yngvi-Freyr, then, assuming I have interpreted the symbolism correctly, the *Beowulf*-poet’s implicit association of this divine sword with a candle (possibly the Paschal Candle) and with the Cross—and therefore with Christ—may appear surprising in religious terms. Such an association would, however, be explicable for many reasons:

(a) The heathen god was apparently ‘the son of Man’ (Tacitus’ Mannus), as was Christ.

(b) The heathen god may well have been ‘god made man’—notably in the form of Hroðgar in *Beowulf*; Gunnarr, the man who takes the place of Freyr in *Ǫgmundar þátr dyttis*; and Ívarr ljómi in *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*. Christ was similarly God incarnate.

(c) The heathen god’s name, in the form *enguz* ‘Ing’, is that of the cross-shaped letter *X* in the Gothic alphabet invented in the fourth century by the Christian Ulfilas; and the Old English *Ing*-rune (ᛝ) resembles a double cross. *X* is also the Greek letter *chi*, the first letter in *Χριστός* ‘Christ’, and to this day stands for ‘Christ’ in the abbreviation ‘Xmas’ for ‘Christmas’.

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11 See Miller, *Epic Hero*, 209–10. Also, for the sword as a symbol of familial continuity, see Davidson, ‘Sword at the Wedding’.

Conclusion

(d) The heathen god’s name or title, Freyr ‘Lord’, would invite identification with Christ the Lord.

(e) The heathen god was closely linked with the sun, as was Christ.

(f) The heathen god, who wielded an antler, may well have been identified with a stag, as was Christ.

(g) The heathen god wielded a sword, as did Christ (e.g., Matthew 10.34).

(h) The heathen god appears the most virtuous of the Germanic gods in early Scandinavian sources. Christ was without sin.

(i) The heathen god was a bestower of peace and a sponsor of marriage. The reign of the Danish King Fróði III, whom scholars link with Yngvi-Freyr, was associated with the Augustan Peace, during which Christ was born.

(j) The heathen god was one of the Vanir, who seem to have had the ability to resurrect the dead, as did Christ.

(k) The heathen god may be linked to Baldr (see Chapter 10), who dies innocently, descends to Hel and returns from the dead, like Christ.

13 This finding is perhaps surprising, given the Vanir’s reputation for incest, which could well be implicit in the paired names Freyr ‘Lord’ and Freyja ‘Lady’. But whereas Freyr’s sister had a reputation for sorcery and promiscuity, he himself does not in surviving Old Norse texts. Indeed, in Lokasenna (37) Týr claims that Freyr makes no girl or wife weep. Whereas Öðinn is notorious as a gender-changer, an oath-breaker and a worker of disreputable female magic, and Þorr is an oathbreaker and a bulldozer, even Loki can level only lukewarm criticism at Freyr: he merely observes in Lokasenna that Freyr gave his sword away in exchange for Gerðr. Saxo, however, does condemn Frø, his latinization of Freyr (GD, I, 154–5).

14 Adam of Bremen, in his Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum (4.26–7), remarks on the god’s bestowal of pacem voluptatemque ‘peace and pleasure’ on men, and observes that men sacrificed to him when marriages were to be celebrated; Schmeidler, Adam vom Bremen, 258–9. As we have seen, Snorri corroborates the idea that Freyr bestowed peace.

15 One reason for the link is that the name Fróði is closely related to fróðr ‘wise/fertile’, an epithet of Freyr in Fgr Skirnism (1, 2).

16 In Old Norse it is called Fróðafríðr ‘Fróði’s Peace’; see Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, I, 24; A. H. Krappe, ‘Yngvi-Frey and Aengus mac Oc’, SS 17 (1943), 174–8 at 174–5.

17 The Greek mythological figure of Triptolemus, whom I compared with Ing in Chapter 6, also granted hope for the afterlife through his involvement in the Eleusinian Mysteries.
Additionally, that Yngvi-Freyr was accommodated into a Christian world-view is shown by his depiction, alongside Óðinn and Þórr, on a twelfth-century tapestry from Skog Church in Hälsingland, Sweden.\(^\text{18}\) Ingi was also the name of a Swedish king (died c. 1110) who suppressed paganism and suffered for his Christianity; he was betrayed by a close kinsman and driven from the land after his people conducted a horse sacrifice (to the heathen Ing/Yngvi-Freyr?), but later returned and restored the Christian faith.\(^\text{19}\) Also noteworthy is the figure of Ingimundr Þorsteinsson in Vatnsdœla saga. Together, his name and representation suggest an amalgam of aspects of Ing/Freyr, including possibly his sword, and the medieval Christian notion of the noble heathen.\(^\text{20}\)

If the giant sword were, from a Germanic perspective, originally a weapon of Ing, this identification raises the prospect, which I mention tentatively, of an underlying link with the sword’s Judaeo-Christian aspect, one based on the inscription on its hilt.

The giant sword’s hilt records, probably at least partly in runes, or … fyrngewinnes ‘the origin of ancient strife’ (1688–9). The nature of that strife is uncertain, but, as Dennis Cronan has argued, a prime candidate must be the first murder, namely Cain’s killing of his brother Abel, which is introduced early in the poem in connection with Grendel (102–10) and mentioned again in connection with Grendel and his mother shortly before her attack on Heorot (1258–67).\(^\text{21}\) The poet’s vagueness about both the original owner of the ancient giant sword and its inscription encourages the speculation that, from a Judaeo-Christian

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\(^\text{19}\) Tolkien, Saga, 62–3.

\(^\text{20}\) See L. van Wezel, ‘Mythology as a Mnemonic and Literary Device in Vatnsdœla saga’, in A. Andrén, K. Jennbert and C. Raudvere (ed.), Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions: An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3–7, 2004 (Lund, 2006), 289–92 at 289–90. Additionally, J. Büschgens, ‘Vatnsdœla saga and Onomastics: The Case of Ingimundr Þorsteinsson’, in A. Hey et al., Á austvega, I, 160–6 at 164 observes that the ‘depiction of Ingimundr as a saintlike figure is quite remarkable for someone who earlier on seemed to have a special relationship to the pagan god Freyr … Freyr might have been less problematic as a prefiguration of the Christian god than giant slaying Þórr or the sorcerer Óðinn. At some point Ingimundr seems to have realized that Freyr is just a shell for the “real” divine guide of his fortunes, the one who created the sun and the whole world’.

\(^\text{21}\) Cronan, ‘Origin’. Note also Hroðgar’s designation of Grendel as ealdgewinna (1776) ‘the old adversary’ and of his actions against Heorot as eald gewin ‘old strife’ (1781).
perspective, it might be the very weapon by which Cain became the ‘edge/sword-slayer’ (ecgbanan 1262) of Abel.

This raises the possibility of a specific underlying point of connection between the poem’s heathen Germanic and Judaeo-Christian perspectives. For in both cases the giant sword might then be the possession of a fratricidal ploughman. On the Germanic side we could have Ing, the celestial Ploughman (Boötes), who, as Freyr, slew giants, including Beli, who were brothers to his wife, the giantess Gerðr. On the Judaeo-Christian side, we could have the fratricide Cain as agricola ‘farmer/ploughman’ in the Vulgate (Genesis 4:2), as one who operabatur terram ‘worked the earth’ in the Old Latin Bible, and as one who, according to the fifth-century poet Cyprianus Gallus, curvo terram vertebat aratro ‘turned the earth with a curved plough’.22 In either case, the ploughman’s sword might originally have been his plough’s detachable and hafted coulter.23

An agricultural aspect to the giant sword would be in keeping with the use of Skírnir’s analogous weaponry, which may bring about the arrival of spring in Fór Skírnis. Thus Skírnir threatens to strike Gerðr, whose name and associations with frost (compare the analogous giantess Hrímgörðr ‘Frosty Enclosed Ground’) suggest, in one respect, a frozen field in winter, which yields to Freyr, the ‘fair-weather traveller’, in a meeting on ‘Barley-Isle’ in springtime.24 In Beowulf, the giant sword melts after use, inspiring a comparison with the vernal thaw; also the dark, forbidding landscape described before the giants’ defeat is mentioned no more—the returning men simply take a cuþe stræte ‘known road’ (1634), one suggestive of the foldwegas ‘earth-ways’ thought to be fægere ‘fair’ and cystum cuðe ‘known to be choice’ for

22 See Cross and Hill, Prose Solomon and Saturn, 100–1.
23 G. Henderson, ‘Cain’s Jaw-Bone’, JWCI 24 (1961), 108–14 at 110–11 suggests that the large cleaver-like weapon with which Cain kills Abel on the ninth- or tenth-century Irish Muiredach’s Cross is a coulter. A Hebrew work of uncertain date which purports to be the Biblical Book of Jasher attests such a belief: ‘And Cain hastened and rose up, and took the iron part of his ploughing instrument, with which he suddenly smote his brother and he slew him’; M. M. Noah, Sefer ha-Yashar: The Book of Jasher; referred to in Joshua and Second Samuel (New York, 1840), 3 (1:25).
24 I consider this interpretation of Fór Skírnís supplementary to that proposed below, in which the sun-controlling god Freyr/Skírnir marries the lunar giantess Gerðr. An individual myth may support multiple interpretations, especially as it is liable to accrue new meanings as it evolves through time and space. Cf. Dubois, ‘Mythic Sun’, 218–9.
horse-racing after the dismemberment of Grendel (864–7).²⁵ Beowulf, it also appears, would make a fine wielder of a celestial ploughman’s sword since, as both ‘Bee-Wolf’ (i.e., ‘Bear’)²⁶ and watchman against Grendel, he suggests not just Ursa Major ‘the Great Bear’, a constellation associated with Boötes (Greek Arctophylax ‘Bear-Watcher/Guardian’), but also the golden Arcturus ‘Bear-Guardian’, Boötes’ brightest star.²⁷ In this respect, Beowulf, who emerges like a bear in springtime from near-death in Grendel’s lair, may not just be representative of Ing the Ploughman, but in a sense actually part of him.²⁸

That the episode at the heart of Beowulf should have a basis in agricultural myth would also be in keeping with the poem’s opening. There we hear of Scyld Scefing ‘Son of Sheaf’ and the arrival of Beow ‘Barley’, whose blæd wide sprang ‘glory/leaf sprang widely’ (18).²⁹ It may be no coincidence either that the most famous monster-slayer of all, St. George, was also a ploughman, etymologically at least (Greek Georgios, literally ‘earth-worker’, i.e., ‘ploughman’); and he, too, was often imagined as a bringer of springtime.³⁰

Returning to Beowulf’s stag-hunt, we find that this passage not only hints at the relevance of Freyr-mythology, but also offers a clue to how


²⁶ I incline to the view that, whichever came first, both *Beow-wulf ‘Barley-Wolf’ and Beo-wulf ‘Bee-Wolf’ (i.e., Bear) are senses relevant to the poem’s interpretation.

²⁷ On the other hand, classical authors often associated Arcturus with storms, and Virgil indicated that it impeded farmers’ work; Allen, Star Names, 99.

²⁸ Cf. Heofon rece swealg ‘Heaven swallowed the smoke (from Beowulf’s pyre)’ (3155), which hints that Beowulf’s soul ends up in the sky. It is also of interest that the German celestial cartographer Johann Bayer (1572–1625) knew Arcturus as Gladius ‘Sword’; Allen, Star Names, 101–2.

²⁹ See further Tolley, ‘Beowulf’s Scyld Scefing Episode’; Bruce, Scyld and Scef; W. Sayers, ‘The Names Bêow, Scêf; Scyld and Béowulf: Shares into Swords’, ES 97 (2016), 815–20. Relevant to the mere-episode of Beowulf and its reference to the Flood may be Fulk, ‘Eddic Analogue’, which identifies an Old Norse myth involving the milling of grain-giants—a myth which, it appears likely, Snorri turned into a version of the destruction of almost all giants by the Flood, the exceptions being one male giant (Bergelmir), his wife and their household (compare Grendel, his mother and the other creatures of the mere?). Note, too, the interpretation of the name Beowulf as *Beow-wulf ‘Barley Wolf’, and the suggestion of ‘grinding’ in the name Grendel.

³⁰ See S. Riches, St George: A Saint for All (London, 2015), 72. Additionally, Riches observes that St. George was invoked in medieval English charms against the ‘mare’, a type of monster with which Grendel’s mother (a likely counterpart to Sinmara) has something in common.
the giant sword may, in the back-story, have come to be confined in the mere’s depths. The pursuit of this hart by hounds suggests the predation on Heorot of the wolfish mere-giants in whose lair the sword resides; this prompts the suspicion that the giants in some way seized this sword, which they never use, from an associated figure. Although two Old Norse texts raise the alternative possibility that, like Mistilteinn and Angrvaðill, the giant sword fell into the water’s depths after being dislodged from its bearer’s hand during a fight with an evil foe (see Chapter 15), I suspect a seizure by the heorowearh ‘sword-thief’ (1267) Grendel using his glove-bag, quite possibly to satisfy his heorogifre ‘sword-greedy’ (1498) mother and to bring darkness to Heorot.

Again, Old Norse literature supplies potentially illuminating parallels. In a late version of Heiðreks saga, a stag-hunt precedes the acquisition of a beautiful and probably solar sword from a dwarf, who probably stole part of the sun in order to forge it. Beowulf’s stag-hunt is also suggestive of northern myths about the pursuit and capture of the sun—represented on the Gosforth Cross and elsewhere in early European tradition by an antlered stag—by one or more wolves or lupine monsters (Sköll, Hati, Fenrir; probably also Garmr and Mánagarmr). These myths appear to be inspired by celestial phenomena including solar eclipses, the wolfish predators then being manifestations of the dark moon which seems to overtake and devour the sun; parhelia (‘sun-dogs’); and the moon’s taking of sunlight in the evening, before being overcome by the returning sun in the morning.

The likely relevance to Beowulf’s mere-episode of myths about the moon’s acquisition and subsequent relinquishing of sunlight is reinforced by other Anglo-Saxon and Norse evidence, which includes analogues in the form of a riddle and an obscure metrical charm. Old English Riddle 29 describes a horned creature (a crescent moon) which stole a vessel of light and attempted to take it home, only for another creature (the sun) to arrive, overcome the thief and reclaim its lost radiance. The lunar thief has much in common with Grendel, while the light’s recovery is suggestive of Beowulf’s acquisition of the probably radiant giant sword and presentation of it to Hroðgar, lord of the sun-like Heorot, on whose behalf he undertook the adventure.

The Old English metrical charm Wið dweorh seems to be informed by a similar myth involving a mythological dwarf-horse-stag(?)—somewhat
suggestive of Grendel—who, either by seizing a solar draught-horse or possessing and thereby taking the form of one, had made off with sunlight, which was later reclaimed by a questing solar creature. This finding is important partly because it indicates that a myth about the loss of sunlight to an evil creature, and its recovery by a solar being, was probably part of heathen Anglo-Saxon tradition. It is also significant because dwarves have distinct lunar connections in Old Norse literature, where the highly specific and peculiar concept of the dwarf-horse-stag recurs and may be embodied by the dwarf Dvalinn. It was Dvalinn who seems to have stolen the sun (to his undoing), rather as the dwarf-horse-stag(?) Vigdvalinn possessed a solar antler in Sólarljóð. It was also Dvalinn who forged the sword which shone like the sun in Heiðreks saga, presumably using sunlight he had stolen. Given the apparent broad agreement between Old English and Old Norse traditions that a dwarf made off with the sun or sunlight, it is noteworthy that Old Norse dwarves are close kin to giants, and that at least one dwarf-thief, Alvíss (possibly an alias of Dvalinn himself), had the appearance of a giant. This encourages the suspicion that nocturnal giants such as Grendel and his mother also stole sunlight, which was subsequently recovered.

This suspicion strengthens when other Old Norse evidence is considered. Old Norse giants and trolls, especially lupine ones, certainly desire the sun, and the most famous and terrible of them, Fenrir, will eventually succeed in devouring it. Of particular interest for the study of Beowulf in this regard are episodes from two sagas that may preserve memories of the possession of a stolen solar sword by a lunar giant or similar creature.

In Hrómundar saga Gripssonar, the hero learns of the whereabouts of the sword Mistilteinn from an old man called Máni ‘Moon’. Máni is not a giant, but he directs Hrómundr to the sword’s current owner, who effectively is: an undead, trollish monster called Práinn who lives in a dark burial-mound containing magically pilfered treasure. Práinn bears a strong similarity to both Grendel and his mother. He also bears what is otherwise a dwarf-name.

More striking still is the testimony of Sörla saga sterka, in which the eponymous hero (again analogous to Beowulf) overcomes a giantess called Mána ‘Moon’ (comparable to Grendel’s mother) and requires her to present him with a remarkable sword. This she does a month later,
having stolen it. The following features identify this sword as a likely symbol of sunlight stolen by the moon: the weapon’s magical theft by a giantess closely comparable to Grendel’s mother; its likely kinship with the sword Sigrljómi; and a delay in its acquisition that reflects the length of the lunar cycle.

Also significant are traditions about the Man in the Moon and related figures in English and Norse sources. These include thirteenth- and fourteenth-century and post-medieval English sources which describe the Man as a gatherer of thorny sticks—originally, I suspect, sunbeams, which may once also have been imagined as shining ‘twig-swords’. The Man, who was depicted as a thief with a dog, and who was associated (like Grendel and his mother) with Cain, gathered these sticks on a large fork. This fork is a distinctive feature which finds likely parallel in Old Norse sources, some of which may otherwise appear fantastically arbitrary, even incoherent. Chief among these is the Eddic poem Völuspá, which, I have argued, refers to a murderous lupine troll who acquires sunlight on a pitchfork on behalf of his mother, an old, nameless, wolfish giantess who inhabits what is probably a wooded bog. Her implicit desire for sunlight, together with her locale’s correspondence to the site of the imprisonment of the ‘dead’ female moon in a Lincolnshire folk-tale, encourages identification of her more specifically with the dark (i.e., new) moon. She even appears to correspond to Grendel’s old, nameless, wolfish mother, who similarly dwells in a wooded, boggy lake, one which burns by night with what are probably the blueish, moonlight-like flames of ignis fatuus. Furthermore, the Old Norse giantess’s pitchforker offspring may correspond to Grendel, whose arm and hand tipped with steel-like nails—possibly subtly described as an unheoru ‘un/bad-sword’ (987)—appear broadly comparable to a large fork. If this is correct, Grendel, who has been called ‘the most interesting monster of the Middle Ages’, grows yet more intriguing.

Further support for the proposition that Grendel and his mother were identified with the moon, especially in its implicitly acquisitive dark phase, may come from their repeated association with the noun nið. This Old English word, I have proposed, may sometimes mean ‘waning/dark (phase of the) moon’, as ON nið does. Additionally, Grendel is repeatedly

31 J. B. Friedman, The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought (Syracuse, 2000), 107.
associated with OE *wan(n)/won(n)*, a word indicative of darkness and deprivation and suggestive of the moon’s waning. Moreover, within *Beowulf*, the exclusively nocturnal predations of Grendel and his mother, and of the climactic dragon, should be remembered, along with their likely stimuli. Grendel was enraged by the sound of a poet singing of the creation of the *withebeorhtne wang* ‘beautifully bright plain’ of the Earth (93) and of *sunnan ond monan* ‘the sun and moon’, the *leoman* ‘luminaries’ which served to *leohthe landbuendum* ‘as light for land-dwellers’ (94–5). The dragon—a *niðdraca* ‘dark-moon(?) drake’—was enraged by the theft from its lair of a precious cup, a plausible solar symbol. If this third monster corresponds to the dark-moon dragon Niðhöggr of *Völuspá*, then all three of *Beowulf*’s main monsters have counterparts in the most important poem of Old Norse mythology.

Parallels in preceding Old English texts in the manuscript containing *Beowulf*, and in Old Norse literature and art more generally, also support the identification of a lunar/solar theme within *Beowulf* and of a lunar aspect to its monsters. They include:

(a) The description by the Old English translator of the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, which immediately precedes *Beowulf* in the manuscript, of a murderous creature with a moon-like head (*Quasi Caput Luna*). This creature’s description is likely to have been influenced by that of Grendel and Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*.

(b) The focus of the end of the *Letter of Alexander* on the Trees of the Sun and Moon.

(c) The correspondence between Grendel’s mere and the Lake of the Moon in *The Wonders of the East*, the text preceding the *Letter of Alexander* in the manuscript.32

(d) The close connection between the revenant *Glám* ‘Gleam/Moon’, an Old Norse analogue (or partial derivative) of Grendel, and the moon in *Grettis saga*.

(e) The similarities between Grendel’s mother and other Norse giantesses identified or associated with the moon or the

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32 In addition, the fact that Grendel and his mother lived in a sea-like mere would render them subject to the force of the moon, whose link to the tides was known to Bede.
The presence of a fiery wolf-headed dragon, which probably represents the dark moon seeking to devour (i.e., eclipse) the sun, on the Gosforth Cross.

The reference in Thorsteins saga Vikingssonar to a sword of heavenly light called Angrvaðill ‘Grief-Wane’, which was at one time owned (probably unrightfully) by a gibbous moon-giant and which killed his fork-wielding son.

All in all, the weight of this and other evidence that I have gathered—albeit that it is mainly comparative and much later than a seventh- or eighth-century Beowulf—gives us reason to believe that the mere-episode in Beowulf and its immediate aftermath may reflect an underlying myth in which wolfish lunar giants stole or arrogated and hid sunlight, which was subsequently repossessed by a sword-wielding agent of the sun. In addition to Grendel’s description as a heorowearh and his mother’s greed for swords, this proposal gains credibility from the presence in Beowulf of a fairly widespread theme of thievery, starting with Grendel’s taking of ‘Bright-Danes’ from Heorot and culminating in the theft of a precious (solar?) cup from the dragon’s den. The poet may even equip Grendel with an admirably suitable bag in which to purloin fiery loot: the giant has a dragon-skin (which is to say fire-resistant) glove which doubles as a swag-bag. In Beowulf the stolen sunlight, I propose, is symbolized by the radiant giant sword of the weather-god who controls the sun, namely Ing/Yngvi-Freyr. Grendel and his mother—the latter possibly the giant sword’s specific guardian—were defeated by Beowulf, who, by no coincidence, was both a prince of the Weder-Geatas ‘We(a)ther-Geatas’ (1492, 1612) and the emissary (and virtual son) of Hroðgar, lord of the sun-like hall to which the shining golden hilt was brought. And with this huge, implicitly solar hilt, Beowulf brought its counterpart, Grendel’s huge head, which may symbolize the conquered, dead moon—at once a terrible (geslic 1649) spectacle and a beautiful sight (wliteseon 1650).

In short, I suggest that Beowulf returns to Heorot effectively bearing two disembodied heads of celestial significance: a cross-shaped sword-head, which symbolizes the blazing sun, and Grendel’s head, which symbolizes the dead moon—a combination paralleled on an Anglo-Saxon grave-marker from Lindisfarne.
The full picture, however, is not quite that straightforward, as *Beowulf* appears neatly to combine not one but two myths about the theft and repossession of sunlight. The second myth is latent in the description of Grendel’s mother as a sword-greedy *brimwylf* ‘sea-she-wolf’—in other words, I have suggested, as a monstrous fish with an appetite for swords—and in the impression of identity between her and the waters of the mere she inhabits. As a pike or other predatory fish hungry for a sword, she and her similarly acquisitive mere may correspond to similar fish of medieval Norse and later-recorded Finnish myths, which variously swallow the sword *Mistilteinn*, eggs that give rise to the sun, or a spark of heavenly fire. When Beowulf beheaded Grendel’s mother, it seems implicit that the sudden appearance of sunlight came not just from the giant sword but also from her opened body.

If, in the back-story, Grendel and his mother stole and concealed the sun-god’s sword, we may wonder why they did so. I suggest it was partly because they were dark-lunar water-dwellers envious of the radiance given to land-dwellers (*landbuendum* 95) in a narrativization of the natural phenomenon of the moon’s appropriation of light from the sun. From a Judaeo-Christian perspective, a clue to such a motivation may survive in an Old English prose tract recording a dialogue between Solomon and Saturn. The wise Solomon declares that the eyes of the anthropomorphized Pater Noster are twelve thousand times brighter than the Earth, even if it were covered with the brightest lily flowers, and each flower’s leaf had twelve suns and each flower twelve moons, and each moon were twelve thousand times brighter than *ieo wæs ær Abeles slege* ‘it was of old before Abel’s slaying’. From this passage we

33 Anlezark, *Old English Dialogues*, 74. Another Old English prose text records that on the fourth day of Creation God set the sun and moon in the sky and *þa wæs seo sunne seofon sidam beorhtre donne heo nu is, ond se mona hæfde da da beorhtnesse þe seo sunne nu hafað. Ac þa Adam ond Eua on neorxnawonge gesyngodan, da wæs þæm tunglum gewonad heora beorhtnes, ond hi næfdon na siddan butan þone seofodan dal heora leohites* ‘then the sun was seven times brighter than it is now, and the moon had then the brightness that the sun now has. But when Adam and Eve sinned in paradise, then the brightness of those heavenly bodies was dimmed, and since then they have had only the seventh part of their (former) light’; Rauer, *Old English Martyrology*, 68. Cf. C. D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1993), 250 n. 129. See also MIFL, motif A755.6 ‘Moon’s phases as punishment for moon’s misdoing.’ On the consequences of Abel’s murder according to other Anglo-Saxon authors, see C. D. Wright, ‘The Blood of Abel and the Branches of Sin: *Genesis A, Maxims I* and Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*’, *ASE* 25 (1996), 7–19.
may reasonably infer a tradition that the moon lost much of its light after Cain murdered Abel, whether due to grief or punishment. Given this evidence, we may also entertain the possibility that a passage from the Old English poem *Maxims I* which repeatedly uses the word *nið* alludes to—or encouraged—a tradition that the moon’s waning or dark phase originated from this crime. In the following context *nið* clearly means principally ‘hostility, malice’, but, as sometimes in *Beowulf*, it perhaps also hints at the sense ‘lunar wane/darkness’:

> Wearð fæhþo fyra cynne, siþþan furþum swealg
> eorðe Abeles blode. Næs þæt andæge nið,
> of þam wrohtdropan wide gesprungon,
> micel mon ældum, monegum þeodum
> bealoblenden niþ. Slog his broðor swæsne
> Cain, bone cwealm nerede; cuþ wæs wide siþþan,
> þæt ece nið ældum scod, swa ðapolwarum. (*ASPR* 3, 192–8)

Feuding befell the race of men just as soon as Abel’s blood was swallowed by the earth. That was no one-day *nið*: from it there sprang enmity-drops widely, great wickedness for men [or ‘from those enmity drops there sprang widely great wickedness for men’], for many peoples bale-blended *nið*. He slew his sweet brother, Cain (did), the one whom death spared; it was widely known then that eternal *nið* harmed men, as to pestilence-dwellers(?)\(^\text{34}\).

Given the moon’s association with Cain in medieval tradition, much of its light was perhaps confiscated as a punishment by God, who may also have placed dark ‘marks’ on the moon, just as he placed a ‘mark’ on Cain—but this is only a guess. Certainly, Grendel and his mother were descendants of Cain, whose fratricide the poet twice mentions when introducing them. Therefore, they may have stolen the solar giant sword partly in an attempt to restore the moon’s former luminosity (which is also to say theirs) or to spite the undimmed sun—or both. As giants of both Germanic and Judaeo-Christian worlds, they probably also stole and concealed the giant sword to prevent its use against them by the sun-god.

It remains to elucidate the analogous myths behind the poems *Svipdagsmál* and *Før Skírnis*, which may shed further light on the nature

\(^{34}\) On the interpretation of this passage, see Wright, ‘Blood of Abel’, 12–14.
of the giant sword, Hrunting, and the relationship between the sun and moon. These texts appear to preserve similar myths about the theft or other acquisition of sunlight by dwarves and giants linked with the moon.

An important clue to the interpretation of Svipdagsmál lies in the name of its hero, Svipdagr, a compound of the nouns svipr and dagr. The former noun has a variety of meanings: ‘swoop’, ‘sudden loss’, ‘glimpse of a person, a fleeting, evanescent appearance’, ‘look, countenance’, ‘likeness’. The latter means simply ‘day’. Svipdagr, therefore, means ‘swooping day’, ‘sudden loss of day’, ‘fleeting day’ or ‘likeness of day’. This finding admits an interpretation of Svipdagr, son of Sólbjartr ‘Sun-Bright’, as a personification of the daylight-radiating sun. More specifically, he may represent a sun that has been temporarily dimmed, perhaps by eclipse or nightfall, or, in view of the poem’s references to coldness, by winter—the season when the sun is weakest and the days shortest.

Svipdagr, it seems, fundamentally goes in quest of lost solar light. This light is symbolized both by the submerged twig-sword Lævateinn, which he probably acquires to free his destined bride (perhaps by killing the giantess Simnara), and the sólbjartr ‘sun-bright’ Menglöð herself, whom he certainly wins. Lævateinn was originally taken by the arch-thief Loki from a radiant branch of the world-tree and then guarded beneath a whirlpool (lúðr) by Simnara, a pale giantess. She shares her deathly, moon-like pallor with the giant-like dwarf Alvíss, and her implicit nature as a mara ‘mare’-monster suggests a kinship with the ‘mare’-like attack of Grendel’s mother on Beowulf. Menglöð, for her part, gives the impression of being restricted to the golden castle that she rules, which was built at least partly by ‘sun-blind’ dwarves—a race associated with the moon, the theft and concealment of sunlight, and the manufacture and possession of solar weapons—and guarded by two dogs (one parhelion/sun-dog and one paraselene/moon-dog?). If, rather than the moon, Menglöð simply personifies the light lost by

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35 CV s.v. Note also the poetic ‘sword’-terms svipuðr ‘swooper’ and svipaljótr ‘ugly swooper’ in PTP, 796–7.
37 In the far north, of course, the sun does not rise at all during wintry nights. Zavaroni, ‘Mead’, 84 argues that Svipdagr is ‘a god of the winter sun’.
the sun during winter, her confinement to a dwarf-made stronghold surrounded by flicker-flame (ignis fatuus?) may still implicate the moon in her separation.

Svipdagr’s implicit liberation of Menglöð from the body of the fortress Lýr ‘Pollack/Whitefish/Pike/Fish’, which quivered on the tip of a pointed weapon, suggests an underlying parallel, otherwise obscured, with both the excision of Mistilteinn from a pike in Hrómundar saga Gripssonar and that of the sun from a pike or other fish in Finnish tradition. Additionally, although hardly diagnostic on its own, the name Menglöð ‘Necklace-Glad’ calls to mind Freyja, the goddess who delighted in the doubtless gleaming Brísingamen and who was lusted after by giants and dwarves. Freyja, as ‘Lady’ and one of the incestuous Vanir, may well have been the sexual partner of Freyr ‘Lord’. It is, therefore, probably no coincidence that Svipdagr has much in common with Freyr/Skírnir and with Óðinn, who, we noted earlier, seems to have appropriated aspects of Freyr’s mythology. If Svipdagr does (or did) represent Freyr, and if Menglöð represents Freyja, their sexual union would encourage the idea that the confined Menglöð once personified the moon (perhaps with Baily’s beads), as Norse tradition identifies the sun and moon as siblings, and that, as in For Skírnis (the poem which has most in common with Svipdagsmál), they were married.

In For Skírnis, Skírnir, representative of the solar Freyr, similarly sets out to claim a radiant, but fire-enclosed and almost inaccessible female, in this case the giantess Gerðr. She does not appear to be imprisoned but rather content to live in her father’s home, a place apparently surrounded by or beneath the sea. Her radiant arms might initially be thought to identify her as a solar creature, but I believe her frostiness and the likelihood that the fire protecting her home is a nocturnal ignis fatuus points rather to a waxing lunar or plenilunar

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38 Although no surviving myth tells of an abduction of Freyja by dwarves or giants, she was desired by both races. Dwarves have sex with her by night in Sörla þáttr. The giant Prymr (compare the gate Prymsgjall of Menglöð’s stronghold in Fjölsvinsmál 10) demands her in exchange for Þórr’s hammer in Þrymskviða. A giant-builder hired by the gods requests her as payment, along with the sun and the moon, in SnEgylf, 34–6.


40 See Chapter 8 n. 72. In addition, the Old Norse term hlýrn, which can denote the sun and moon, may mean ‘pair of twins; brother and sister’, being related to hlýri ‘brother’; see PTP, 914–5.
figure lit by appropriated sunlight. If so, Før Skírnis dramatizes a sun-controlling god’s repossession of sunlight by overcoming and securing a forthcoming union with a lunar giantess.41

Another trace of Gerðr’s fundamentally lunar nature may survive in Freyr’s impatient observation that, in waiting for his meeting with Gerðr, a mánaðr ‘month’ has often seemed shorter to him than a single night, a month being essentially the length of a lunar cycle. Nevertheless, this lunar aspect of Gerðr is obscure in Før Skírnis. It is, however, made clearer by parallels with her half-namesake, the giantess Hrímgérðr, who appears to be the daughter of the sun-hunting, and therefore implicitly lunar, wolf Hati. Appreciation of Gerðr’s lunar essence is also strengthened by the parallel between her and the initially hostile but subsequently friendly giantess Mána ‘Moon’ in Sörla saga sterka (whose existence confirms that the medieval Norse moon was sometimes female).42 It is also bolstered, I believe, by parallels between Gerðr and the hunchback (gibbous) troll-woman Margerðr, daughter of a probably lunar giant in Hjálmþés saga, and between Gerðr and Grendel’s mother.

A further clue to Gerðr’s involvement in a solar/lunar myth may be the puzzling term gambanteinn which apparently describes the weapon with which Skírnir overcame Gerðr. Whereas the word’s second element, -teinn, means ‘twig’, the meaning and etymology of the initial element gamban- are obscure.43 Encouraged, however, by the affinity between Beowulf’s mere-episode and Før Skírnis, and by the presence in the northern Danelaw and Norway of several Anglo-Saxon sword-pommels bearing solar and lunar imagery in the ninth or tenth century (see below),

41 There are widespread parallels to the notion that the sun marries the moon; see MIFL, motif A736.1.4, ‘Sun and moon married’. The idea that Før Skírnis describes some (other) sort of hieros gamos ‘sacred marriage’ is not new; see, for example, G. Steinsland, Det hellige bryllup og norron kongeideologi (Larvik, 1991); S. G. Eriksen, ‘Popular Culture and Royal Propaganda in Norway and Iceland in the 13th century’, Collegium Medicale 20 (2007), 99–135. Snorri refers to the marriage of a female called Sól ‘Sun’, sister of a male Máni ‘Moon’, to a certain Glenr ‘Brilliant One(?), a union which angered the gods; SnEGylf, 13; see also PTP, 367–8 and SnESkáld, I, 39.

42 Mána’s changing disposition, from hostile to friendly, is itself consistent with the alternately dark and radiant faces of the moon. On such ambiguousness in some other lunar females, see M. O. Lee, ‘Per Nubila Lunam: The Moon in Virgil’s Aeneid’, Vergilius (1959-) 34 (1988), 9–14.

43 For suggestions, see ANEW and ÍO s.v. gamban-. For earlier studies of this word, see A. G. van Hamel, ‘Gambanteinn’, Neophilologus 17 (1932), 136–43, 234–9; Sturtevant, ‘Three Old Norse Words’, 109–11; von See et al., Kommentar, Bd. 2, 126, 203; Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 411–2.
I suggest that gambanteinn may be a partial calque of an OE *gambantan, with -tan ‘twig’ translated as -teinn but gamban- left unchanged. Elsewhere in Old Norse gamban- has been said to serve as an indicator of magnitude, magical potency or divine power: it appears in the terms gambanreiddi ‘gamban-wrath’, which describes the gods’ anger at Gerðr’s rebuttal of Skírnir in For Skírnis 33, and gambansumbl ‘gamban-feast’, which describes a feast of the gods in the hall of Ægir/Gymir in Lokasenna 8.44 If such is indeed its significance, I suggest it is a secondary development for an originally foreign word, the precise meaning of which was unappreciated or had been forgotten, but which maintained associations with power and was linked with the giants Gerðr and Ægir/Gymir.

The origin of gamban- lies rather, I suggest, in an Old English noun meaning ‘tribute’ whose nominative singular form is somewhat uncertain: gambe/gombe, gamba/gomba or gamban/gomban.45 This word is attested only twice. The first instance is in the phrase gomban gyldan ‘to pay tribute’, which occurs amid a veiled agricultural myth with possible solar connotations at the start of Beowulf (11),46 the tribute’s recipient being Scyld Scæfing ‘Shield son of Sheaf [= Ing?]’, mythical ancestor of the Danes. The second instance is in the same phrase in the Old English Biblical poem Genesis A (gombon gieldan, 1978), where it describes tribute long paid to the Elamites but now withheld by the defenders of the city of Sodom, to their downfall.47 The word is probably related to Old Saxon gambra ‘tax’ (though the -r- in the latter word is puzzling), which is similarly used with geldan ‘to pay’.48

If this explanation of gambanteinn is correct, or alternatively if ON gamban- is simply cognate and synonymous with OE gambe/gambel

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44 Dronke, Poetic Edda, II, 411–2.
45 In Old English, a before a nasal consonant may be rounded to o. The DOE entry for this word is ? gambe, which identifies it as a weak feminine noun (again with a question mark). I am not the first to relate ON gamban- to this Old English word; Sturtevant, ‘Three Old Norse Words’, 111 argues that senses such as ‘payment’ and ‘tribute’ are secondary, West Germanic developments from a Proto-Germanic root *gamb- meaning ‘magic power’.
46 KB’s glossary entry is headed ‘gome (wk.f.) (-a?, -an?)’.
48 BT s.v. gombe; AEW s.v. gambe. Cronan, ‘Poetic Words’, 29 considers that the Old English noun has ‘been inherited from the West Germanic poetic lexicon and that its appearance in only Beowulf and Genesis A is an indication of the conservatism of these poems.’
gamban, ON gambanteinn would mean ‘tribute’s twig’, ‘twig of tribute’ or ‘tribute-twig’. This could be a term for a sunbeam, a solar ray (from Latin radius, literally ‘staff, rod’) or a ‘shaft’ of sunlight with which the sun or its emissary struck the reluctant, delaying moon-giant in order to extract a ‘tribute/payment’ of light each morning. Or, more likely, since at least one of the two gambanteinar came from a giant, it could be a term for the extracted solar tribute itself, with which the sun or its emissary then struck the transgressing moon.

We may recall how, in other Old Norse texts, and probably in traditions about the Man in the Moon, the sun’s beams are imagined as twig-like rune-staves and thorny sticks. We may also recollect how, according to Svipdagsmál, Loki had taken the presumably luminous Lævateinn from the radiant Mimameiðr ‘Mimi’s tree/branch’ down to the submerged home of the likely lunar giantess Sinmara. Mimameiðr probably constitutes a variant of the world-wood called the holt of Hoddmimir ‘Treasure-Mímir’ in Vafþrúðnismál 45.

Interpretation of the gambanteinn as essentially a sunbeam is compatible with its appearance in both Fór Skírnis and Hárbarðsljóð, these being the only sources in which the word appears. In the former poem the gambanteinn is wielded by Skírnir, who, as a likely hypostasis of the shining Freyr, himself suggests a sunbeam. His gambanteinn appears analogous not only to the radiant giant sword of Beowulf but also, to a lesser degree, to the beadoleoma ‘battle-light’ (1523) Hrunting—an

49 Originally, gambanreiði may have been the ‘wrath of tribute’ or ‘tribute-wrath’ which the gods would direct against Gerðr if she rejected Freyr, and gambansumbl a ‘feast of tribute’ or ‘tribute-feast’ hosted by Ægir/Gymir. Alternatively, perhaps we may understand ‘wrath (worthy) of tribute’ and ‘feast (worthy) of tribute’—in other words, ‘great wrath’ and ‘great feast’. Old English sources attest to many compounds composed of noun + noun, and the first constituent noun may be in the nominative or genitive singular, the latter seen, for example, in sunnanleoma ‘sunray’, sunnanscima ‘sunshine’ and sunnansælgong ‘sunset’; see D. Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, in R. M. Hogg (ed.), The Cambridge History of the English Language. Volume I: The Beginnings to 1066 (Cambridge, 1992), 290–408 at 365–70. For a different explanation of gambanteinn as ‘newly budded’, see HC, 38, n. 50.

50 For another recent interpretation of the gambanteinn as a sunbeam in the underworld, see I. Nordgren, The Well Spring of the Goths: About the Gothic Peoples in the Nordic Countries and on the Continent (New York, 2004), 40, 43. Unfortunately, this book came to my attention too late to assess its other findings, but it is encouraging to see also that its author also identifies Gerðr as a ‘moon-goddess’.

51 It may be relevant that Mímir also appears in names for two of the Old Norse heavens: Hreggmimir ‘Storm-Mímir’ and Vet(r)mimir ‘Winter(?)-Mímir’; PTP, 906–9, 916–7.
explicitly twiggy sword, we shall find. In Hárrbardsljóð it was presumably the touch of the gambanteinn which the giant Hlébarðr had given to Óðinn that drove the donor out of his wits, conceivably due to a ‘stroke of the sun’—that is, sunstroke,\textsuperscript{52} common symptoms of which include confusion and disorientation. In lieu of other evidence, as suggested earlier, the name of this giant donor (otherwise unattested as a proper name) may indicate that when giving the gambanteinn to Óðinn he plucked it from a place of concealed ‘shelter’ (hlé) in his bushy ‘beard’ (barðr).\textsuperscript{53} Additionally, the first element of this name may hint that the gambanteinn came from the sea, or near there, as ON hlé, like English ‘lee’, is principally a nautical word; it might even refer to the giant called Hlér, a personification of the sea.\textsuperscript{54} In either case, Hlébarðr may actually be another alias of the sea-giant GymirÆgir. Such an origin could reflect the sight of the sun’s rays rising from the sea at dawn.\textsuperscript{55}

From the name Hlébarðr we can also deduce, with more confidence, that its bearer was specifically a wolfish giant, as the noun hlébarðr appears in a verse list of poetic terms for vargr ‘wolf/thief/outlaw’, where it occurs immediately after the sun-devouring wolf Fenrir.\textsuperscript{56} This strengthens the case for Hlébarðr’s illicit or jealous (if implicitly concealed) possession of a specifically solar twig, which is further bolstered by the parallels of Hjálmþér’s acquisition of the radiant twig-sword Snarvendill from Vargeisa and Beowulf’s seizure of the radiant giant sword in the proximity of a grundwyrgen ‘ground/depth-wearg’.

As there are grounds for identifying the gambanteinn of Hárrbardsljóð as a solar twig in the illicit or jealous possession of a giant, something

\textsuperscript{52} See OED s.v. ‘sunstroke’.
\textsuperscript{53} In this regard, it is striking that an illustration in Melsteds Edda, an eighteenth-century Icelandic copy of Snorri’s Prose Edda, shows the beard of a sword-wielding Óðinn connected by a yellow band to a pointed ray of the personified sun (see ‘Óðinn úr Melsteds-Eddu’ (June 2002), http://www.handritinheima.is/juni2002/html/god_2.htm). Of course, Óðinn cannot be the giant Hlébarðr of Hárrbardsljóð, but this illustration does at least show the currency of the peculiar concept of a solar beard-hair in Iceland at a later date.
\textsuperscript{54} He also appears as Lerus in Saxo and as Læ in Danish chronicles; see H. E. Davidson and P. Fisher (ed. and trans.), Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes Books I–IX, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1979, 1980; rpt. 1996), II, 136 n. 96, 140–1 n. 127.
\textsuperscript{55} A solar aspect to the one-eyed, all-seeing Óðinn could explain his alias Báleygr ‘Flame-Eyed One’ in Grímnismál 47. See also on this potential aspect, U. Dronke (ed.), The Poetic Edda: Volume III, Mythological Poems II (Oxford, 2011), 62.
\textsuperscript{56} PTP, 902–4; see also ibid., 895–7 for other meanings of hlébarðr (‘bear’, ‘shield’) and the observation that it is a folk-etymological reinterpretation of Latin leopardus ‘leopard’.
similar may be the case for that of Fór Skírnis. After all, either gambanteinn appears in an at least somewhat similar context involving a male god’s drawing of a giantess or troll-women away from her or their usual male company; additionally, Óðinn is thought to have appropriated aspects of the mythology of Freyr, and Gerðr finds parallel in the troll-woman Ýma, who has nine sister troll-women.

If Skírnir’s gambanteinn was similarly a solar twig, this could well be compatible with its inscription (real or threatened) with runes, especially one associated with bleeding, as we have seen the sun described in Sólarljóð as setta dreystöfum ‘set with bloody (rune)-staves’. Furthermore, that Skírnir’s twig came from a sappy branch or sapling within a holt ‘wood’ suggests that it was young and growing in strength—like a sunbeam in the early morning.

Although the location of said holt is uncertain, the parallels with the giantish origin of the gambanteinn in Hárbardsljóð and of other weapons seemingly analogous to Skírnir’s gambanteinn (Lævateinn, Mistilteinn and the giant sword) nonetheless suggest that Skírnir probably acquired it in an aquatic or semi-aquatic setting in the home of giants. Since Skírnir feels the need to tell Gerðr of his trip to the wood, the gambanteinn seems not to have come from Gerðr’s person or immediate proximity. I therefore suggest three other possibilities, though none confidently.

The first is that Skírnir took the gambanteinn from the beard of Gerðr’s father, the giant Gymir (alias Hlébarðr?). Before producing the gambanteinn, Skírnir had said that Gerðr’s father hnígr ‘sinks’ (or ‘will sink’) before him.

The second is that the holt is a wood bounding the giants’ home. It might then be a wood, containing a young tree or branch of recently acquired sunlight, which fuelled the blazing ‘oaken fire’ around Gerðr’s home. If that fire was ignis fatuus (like that on Grendel’s mere), this
would encourage the idea that it was fueled by branches and twigs which fell into a boggy wood akin, or identical, to járnuðr ‘Iron-Wood’, home of the sun-craving old giantess in Völsuðr.59

The third is that Skírnir refers to the holt of Hoddmímir mentioned in Vafþrúðnismál 45 as a place of concealment for two beings who will repopulate the world after Ragnarök. This wood, we have seen, may be an alias for Svipdagsmál’s Mimameiðr, a name identifying the world-tree as a possession of the giant(?) Mimi/Mími. The Norse world-tree is associated with water in the form of three springs, which may originally have been one: Hvergelmir, Urðarbrunnr and Mímisbrunnr.

We can at least say with confidence that Old Norse texts would not be alone in linking the heavens and their light with a wood and its branches. As a Middle English poem we met earlier says, in the evening ‘Now goes the sun under the wood’.60 More strikingly, the concept of a heavenly wood appears in Old English literature: the Prose Solomon and Saturn Pater Noster Dialogue describes angels driving the Devil of hefones holte ‘from heaven’s wood’, shortly before lightning attacks the Devil—with branching heavenly forks?—and se ðunor hit ḍryscend mid ðære fyrenan æcxe ‘the thunder [cf. OE Dunor/ON Þórr], it threshes/oppresses [the Devil] with the fiery axe’.61 Additionally, a Finnish variant of the myth of the fall of heavenly fire records that ‘The red fire fell, one spark shot out from the golden copse, from the silver brake, from the ninth region of the air’;62 here the golden copse sounds solar.

Archaeological support for an interpretation of the gambanteinn as fundamentally a sunbeam, one which the moon probably concealed in a watery underworld, comes in the form of a recent discovery in North Yorkshire. In May 2012 a sword-pommel bearing ornamentation

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59 Cf. the frosty trees by Grendel’s mere and the comparable hellish water of Blickling Homily 16 into which twigs fell (see Chapter 14).

60 See Chapter 13 n. 12. Cf. MIFL, motif 714.2 ‘Sun and moon placed in top of tree’; if the sun resided in the branches of a tree, this would encourage a perception of kinship beween it and the mistletoe.

61 Anlezark, Old English Dialogues, 72–5. Generally on tree-lore in Anglo-Saxon literature, see D. Hooke, Trees in Anglo-Saxon England (Woodbridge, 2010); Bintley, Trees.

in gold foil was found, together with four gold grip-rings, a corroded lower guard and six gold rivets from the same weapon, among the artefacts comprising the Bedale hoard. The remains of the hilt match the style known to archaeologists as Petersen type L,\(^63\) and they bear ornamentation in the late Anglo-Saxon Trewhiddle style. The hilt—no blade was found—has been dated to the late ninth or early tenth century.

In shape and ornamentation, the Bedale pommel finds parallel, albeit partial, in at least five other Anglo-Saxon pommels of similar date from (1) Gilling West, North Yorkshire, (2) Grønneberg, Norway, (3) Heggestrøa, Steinkje, Norway, and, less securely, (4) Dolven, Norway and (5) Fiskerton, Lincolnshire, all of which I mentioned in Chapter 4. All six may be considered members of an Anglo-Saxon stylistic group. Each features a gently upward-curving strip of ornamentation laid upon a similarly curved upper guard. This strip is surmounted in three cases (Grønneberg, Heggestrøa and Dolven) by a shorter band of ornamentation, and in all cases by two roughly vertical bars of decoration leading, on either side, towards the pommel’s cap. Between these bars there is—or, on the Fiskerton and Dolven swords, there evidently once was—a circular design. On the Gilling West sword at least, this design is probably interpretable as a sun-cross; as noted earlier, the Grønneberg and Heggestrøa pommels each also have cross-like designs within a central circle.

Of these six pommels, the one from Bedale stands out. That it bears ornamentation in gold makes it unusual among pommels in the archaeological record of this period; the other related pommels, for example, have silver decoration. But it is the imagery on the Bedale pommel, which is more detailed than that on the other five pommels (at least as they survive), that is of chief interest here. To my knowledge, this imagery has yet to be explained in detail. I therefore offer the following interpretation, based largely on examination of photographs such as Figure 5, of the better-preserved side of the pommel, and my foregoing analysis of myths about conflict between the sun and moon:\(^64\)

\(^63\) J. Petersen, *De norske vikingesverd: en typologisk-kronologisk studie over vikingetidens vaaben* (Kristiania, 1919), 112–6.

\(^64\) Since future study of the Bedale hilt might one day reveal further imagery on the poorly preserved lower guard, and on the side of the pommel from which most ornamentation has been lost (although it appears likely to have been essentially identical to that shown in Figure 5), I offer this interpretation provisionally. For more
(a) Towards the top of what survives of the pommel, at both the left and right edges, a golden crescent probably represents the moon.\(^{65}\) (The Grønneberg pommel has one similar crescent, albeit in silver, on the left, its right-hand crescent having presumably been lost. In their surviving forms, none of the other pommels bear such crescents.)

(b) Slightly further in, again on either side, the top of another crescent may represent the moon rising or descending. (The Grønneberg and Dolven pommels have similar partial crescents in silver.)

(c) The large, gently upward-curving arc from which the crescent moon rises, or to which it descends, could represent a lunar or solar barque.\(^{66}\) Possibly both types of ship are suggested at once. The barque is adorned with an interlace motif potentially suggestive of the curled dragon(s) discussed below.

(d) Above the barque, in the centre, the large, medallion-like golden circle presumably represents either a full moon or, more likely, the sun.

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\(^{65}\) Admittedly, this would be clearer if these crescents were silver, but since the moon not uncommonly appears yellow and takes the sun’s light, a yellow moon is not surprising. The moon is also yellow on the Bronze Age sky disk from Nebra, Germany, for instance; Meller, *Der geschmiedete Himmel*, 22–31; the same disk bears at its base a yellow curve which may well represent a solar barque.

\(^{66}\) For scholarship on the solar barque in northern Europe, see Chapter 12 n. 22.
(e) Surrounding the sun-circle is a detail wholly absent from the other pommels: a curled dragon, almost an ouroboros. It has two upward-curling legs at the top, between which is an upward-pointing tail. Its head, with open eye and mouth, points downwards to touch the top of the large arc and approach the end of its tail. I identify this golden creature as a lunar snake which has surrounded the sun, whether by night when the sun sinks below the horizon or by day during a solar eclipse; possibly the snake’s encircling body reflects the corona visible during an annular solar eclipse. We may recall the similar significance of the wolf-snake on the Gosforth Cross.

(f) Standing on the barque, on either side of the dragon, two vertical gold bands, each also containing foliate interlace, represent the walls of an enclosure on the barque. (On other swords in the group, the enclosure’s roof could be represented by additional ornamentation on the pommel’s cap.)

(g) Within the sun-circle is another unique feature. Although not immediately easy to identify, close examination reveals the greatly elongated body of a creature. Its head, with pointed snout, prominent right eye, triangular ear and open lower jaw, is visible on the left about halfway up. Its neck curls around part of the bottom half of the circle, and leads to a long body, two sinuous legs and a tail which curl around themselves to fill the rest of the circle.\textsuperscript{67} If the circle does represent the sun, this beast might be a solar creature. More likely, though, it is the lunar snake again; its slender, curling body, two legs and tail invite identification with the surrounding dragon. Here we may see it curled jealously around its golden solar prize within a walled enclosure—like, I suggest, the niðdraca around its golden hoard in Beowulf; we might also compare the enclosures to which, we have seen, other lunar thieves took, or intended to take, stolen sunshine.\textsuperscript{68} (On the

\textsuperscript{67} I am indebted here to the analysis in Brunning, ‘From Poetry to Reality’.

\textsuperscript{68} It may be noteworthy that the dragon outside the circle extends up both sides of the enclosure. Immediately before introducing ‘the old one’ and her lunar pitchforker, Völuspá places Niðhögggr in a hall far from the sun on Nástrond ‘Corpse-Shore’,
Grønneberg, Heggestrøa and Dolven pommels the additional shorter horizontal strip of ornamentation on the barque might suggest a plinth on which to display the solar circle.)

(h) Below the barque, on the sword’s upper guard, horizontal pairs of half-crescents (some now missing) represent the dead moon; they also find no parallel on the other swords (at least as preserved). This imagery is in keeping with the concept of the lunar wane as dismemberment, and of the action of the probably solar sword Angrvaðill ‘Grief-Wane’ (see Chapter 14). It may also call to mind the fate of the niðdraca, which Beowulf forwrat … on middan ‘cut through … in the middle’ (2705). Furthermore, since the barque above is presumably afloat, the dead moon apparently resides in water below—as it does in The Dead Moon, as do Grendel and his mother, and as does the bisected niðdraca after its corpse is shoved off a cliff into the sea’s embrace (Beowulf 3131–3).

(i) A golden lozenge between the half-crescents—another feature absent from the other pommels—may represent submerged sunlight acquired by the dead moon and liberated from it when, I infer, it was bisected by a solar warrior. We may recall the light that shone in the monster’s underwater home when Beowulf beheaded Grendel’s mother. (Originally, there was probably another such lozenge on the left of the pommel.)

(j) A leafy golden twig or branch on either side of the bottom of the pommel—again unparalleled on the other swords—represents, I suggest, an Old English *gambantan, the inspiration for, or equivalent of, the gambanteinn. Its positioning beneath the barque again suggests submergence. Furthermore, that this twig would be largely hidden from view when the sword was upright with pommel uppermost, but next to the wielder’s hand when the weapon was drawn and raised for which was presumably by a sea; this hall was entwined with the spines of snakes, and drops of venom fell into it through the roof-vent (37–8). These details raise the possibility that on the Bedale pommel we might see (what doubles as?) a lunar dragon’s enclosure; such a venomous rain might explain the fragmentary golden streams(?)—unparalleled on the other pommels—seen on either side of the dragon’s legs. Additionally, it may be relevant that the niðdraca of Beowulf also inhabited a walled enclosure by the sea.
use, strengthens the case for the gambanteinn’s concealment by a lunar giant or giants, before being seized and recovered by a solar warrior. Its presence also gives materiality to the concept of the twig-sword, of which the Bedale sword may be considered a prime archaeological manifestation.

Support for a celestial interpretation of some aspects of the imagery on the Bedale pommel and its relatives comes firstly from parallels in Gotlandic art thought to date from the early fifth to the early seventh century AD; secondly from a medieval Norwegian candleholder; and thirdly from a far earlier and more distant source. Certain Gotland picture-stones display similar scenes which may well have solar significance (they lack crescent moons, however).69 A stone from Bro church, for example, shows a slender, gently curved, oared ship with central, rectangular enclosure beneath two circles containing swirl-ornamentation (perhaps the sun and moon, or shields), beneath a much larger, swirl-circle with forked appendages around its circumference (probably the sun). Around the scene is a painted border which incorporates at its top, immediately above the ‘sun’, a bar of

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69 For discussion, see Andrén, Tracing, 117–66.
plant-like ornamentation (perhaps heaven’s wood). A second stone, from Sanda church, shows the same elements but with notable additions: half-way up the stone is a horizontal line (presumably representing the ground), on which stands a tree (perhaps the world-tree), above which (in its branches?) are the two smaller circles, which are each completely surrounded by opposing snakes; below the ground is the front half of a horse (?) with gaping mouth, which is above the (manned) ship. A third stone, from Hangvar parish, shows a boat immediately beneath a large swirl-circle containing a cross (probably a sun-cross), which is immediately below an alarming centipede-like dragon with gaping mouth, into which a figure (perhaps Týr) may be placing one hand. A fourth stone, from Martebo church, shows a similar scene with a similar monster, but without the man.

A medieval iron candleholder from Dale Church in Sogn, Norway takes the form of a model of a viking longship. It has three vertical iron spikes in the centre to hold candles, and there are two vexilla, one at the prow and one at the stern. Each vexillum bears a white crescent moon on a red background and is surmounted by a beast’s white head, which appears to have two faces. The designs on the vexilla may be heraldic, but I suggest that the whole model represents, or at least strongly reflects, the concept of a lunar barque.

The far earlier and more distant parallel comes from ancient Egypt. In the Book of Gates the sun-god Ra, enemy of the snake Apep, is pictured travelling by night through the underworld in a slender, gently curved barque. He stands in the middle of the boat within a central enclosure which is surrounded by a snake. There are no crescent moons, however.

70 Lindqvist, Gotlands Bildsteine, I, fig. 11, II, 29, fig. 319 (Bro I); Nylén and Lamm, Stones, 23.
71 Nylén and Lamm, Stones, 29 (Sanda church and churchyard (IV)).
72 Lindqvist, Gotlands Bildsteine, I, fig. 27, II, 69, figs. 403–4 (Austers (I)); Nylén and Lamm, Stones, 31.
73 Nylén and Lamm, Stones, 34–5.
75 See J. Hill, ‘Book of Gates’ (2010), https://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/bookgates and https://www.ancient.eu/image/4543/ra-travelling-through-the-underworld. Freyja’s Brísingamen has also been traced, via the Roman manifestation of the goddess Isis, to an ancient Egyptian source, namely the Menet necklace of the
Some imagination is required to fill the gaps, but I propose that the Bedale pommel’s imagery, read from top to bottom, reflects an Anglo-Saxon myth in which the sun, while journeying by night or day, possibly in its barque, was captured by a lunar snake, which coiled itself around its prey. The snake then perhaps swallowed the sun or at least some of its light, which it regurgitated for the submerged dark moon. Subsequently, however, the sun or a solar champion visited the underwater moon and bisected it with a solar twig-sword, which he perhaps recovered from the moon’s proximity. In doing so he freed the stolen sunlight, so that, after a period of darkness, the sun could shine again, as when the shining blade of a sword is drawn from its scabbard.

If this interpretation of the Bedale pommel is broadly correct, this artefact illustrates essential aspects of the basic celestial myth that lies behind texts such as Riddle 29, Wið dweorh and, I believe, Beowulf. The other, less ornate pommels probably also have a celestial significance, though presumably not quite the same one, as they lack major details such as the dragon, the bisected moon and the golden branch. Nevertheless, since all six Anglo-Saxon pommels were found either in parts of northern England settled by Norsemen or in Norway, they raise the possibility of the transfer of celestial imagery, and concomitantly celestial myth, from Anglo-Saxon England to the viking world, and/or vice versa. As such, the Bedale pommel renders plausible—though scarcely proves—the transfer into Norse mythology of an Anglo-Saxon myth involving a submerged solar twig, a *gambantan, which became known to Norsemen as the gambanteinn and which acquired close relatives in the submerged swords Mistilteinn and Lævateinn.76

An explanation of the gambanteinn as, originally at least, a twig of solar tribute may also help to explain both the sword-name Hrunting in Beowulf and Hrunting’s relationship to the giant sword with which the gambanteinn appears more closely equivalent. For although the etymology of Hrunting is uncertain, it may be interpretable as ‘Descendant (-ing) of a *hrunt’, the hypothesized word being, as Kemp


76 If Lævateinn is the ‘Twig of Treacheries’, this may be because, as a sunbeam-sword, it is repeatedly stolen by the treacherous moon.
Malone argued, the Old English ancestor of modern English ‘runt’, the initial ‘h’ being lost in the transition to Middle English. According to the OED, ‘runt’ is first recorded in the early sixteenth century in the sense ‘old decayed stump of a tree’, but Malone also notes the cognate Danish runte ‘pole’ and expresses confidence that ‘modern English runt can be traced back to OE times’. I suggest that the name Hrunting identifies this sword—crucially described as se beadoleoma at the very moment it fails to injure Grendel’s mother—with a small or decayed stump, branch or twig (scion), symbolic of a weakly radiant sunbeam just before sunrise.

Hrunting was certainly a twig-sword of some sort. Its most distinctive feature was an ecg ‘edge’ or ‘blade’ atertanum fah ‘shining/stained/hostile with poison-twigs’ (1459). This description appears, like many others in Beowulf, usefully ambiguous. Possibly, atertan ‘poison-twig’ is an otherwise unattested kenning for ‘snake’, the phrase describing the curling, snake-like patterns on a pattern-welded blade, or maybe steel rims welded to the sword’s core (eggteinar ‘edge-twigs’ in Old Norse). Alternatively or additionally, atertan might allude to the use of poison in the forging process, especially as the edge of Snarvendill/Hrotti was ‘hardened in the poison of snakes’. Then again, I suggest this description might indicate that Hrunting’s ecg had a

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78 Malone, ‘On the Etymology’, 88. Similarly, for Brady, ‘“Weapons”’, 98, ‘the first element of Hrunting’s name means “long piece of wood”’. SASE5-7, 313, states that Hrunting “may be a derivative of ‘hrung ‘pole, staff’ (our word ‘rung’).”

79 Cf. ON stúfr ‘stump’ as a poetic term for ‘sword’; PTP, 791–2. It is not wholly inconceivable that, in Beowulf, the name Hrunting puns on the sense ‘old, decayed stump/branch of Ing (hrunt-Ing)’.


81 For an overview of interpretations of this unique term, see KB, 205; Lehmann, ‘Atertanum Fah’, 230, for example, suggests that it may mean ‘of gleaming/fiery hilt/pommel’.

82 For eggteinar, see PTP, 808–9. Note the description of the blood-stained snake along the edge of the Sigarshólmr sword in Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar (see Chapter 13). Additionally, Tyrfringr had poisoned edges; Tolkien, Saga, 19.

83 See Chapter 3. So too was Tyrfringr; see Tolkien, Saga, 8. SASE, 132 refers to the use of acid (= poison?) in the making of swords.
The Waning Sword

twig-like, pattern-welded design which was identified with poisonous shoots, such as those of mistletoe. Foliate ornamentation adorns some surviving Anglo-Saxon sword-hilts,\textsuperscript{84} and some sheaths show foliate or somewhat twig-like designs,\textsuperscript{85} though whether any blades bore such decoration is unknown as so many of them are severely corroded. Some earlier Celtic wooden scabbards display representations of mistletoe leaves, which might, judging from the testimony of Pliny (see Chapter 8), have had lunar associations.\textsuperscript{86}

Other evidence indicating that Hrunting was a twig-sword, albeit in a different respect, might survive in \textit{Grettis saga’s} account of the hero’s fight with the giant Gangr. As a \textit{hæftmece} ‘hafted sword’ (1457), Hrunting appears to correspond, albeit problematically, to the weapon described in the saga, rather puzzlingly, as both a \textit{fleinn} ‘bayonet-like pike’ and a \textit{heptisax} ‘hafted sax’.\textsuperscript{87} It was with this weapon that the giant vainly tried to strike Grettir before, again unsuccessfully, reaching for a wall-hung sword corresponding to \textit{Beowulf’s} giant sword.\textsuperscript{88} This \textit{heptisax} had a \textit{tréskapt} ‘tree/wooden-shaft’ as its handle, which broke apart when Grettir parried its blow with his sax.\textsuperscript{89} It may be, however, that the description of the \textit{fleinn}-weapon as a \textit{heptisax} is simply mistaken.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{84} E.g., D. M. Wilson, ‘Some Neglected Late Anglo-Saxon Swords’, \textit{Medieval Archaeology} 9 (1965), 32–54, nos. 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12; R. Underwood, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Weapons and Warfare} (Stroud, 1999), pl. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{85} See E. A. Cameron, \textit{Sheaths and Scabbards in England AD400–1100} (Oxford, 2000), 105 (no. 145), 208 (fig. 51); 105 (no. 147), 212 (fig. 55).
\item \textsuperscript{86} R. Pleiner, \textit{The Celtic Sword} (Oxford, 1993), 67–8. The legendary Norse hero Bǫðvarr Bjarki, an analogue to Beowulf, wielded a sword called \textit{Laufi} (Latin \textit{Løui} in \textit{GD}, I, 118–9), a name probably derived from ON \textit{lauf} ‘leaf’ either because it bore foliate ornamentation or had a leaf-shaped blade; see Falk, \textit{Altnordische Waffenkunde}, 54; PTP, 791–2. In \textit{Völuspa saga}, Óðinn drives an exceptional sword up to the hilt into a huge flowering apple-tree—one of the commonest hosts of mistletoe—called the \textit{Barnstokkr} ‘Child-Trunk’ in the hall of King Völsungr, and only the king’s son Sigmundr (= Sigemund in \textit{Beowulf}) could withdraw it (Finch, \textit{Saga}, 4–5). This may be a variant or relative of a myth which appears in \textit{Svipdagsmál}, namely that of the taking of the (mistletoe?) twig-sword from the world-tree; furthermore, the name \textit{Barnstokkr} raises the possibility of a link with the mistletoe’s piercing of Baldr, Óðinn’s \textit{barn} ‘child’ (\textit{Völsþpa} 31).
\item \textsuperscript{87} Guðni Jónsson, \textit{Grettis saga}, 215.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Guðni Jónsson, \textit{Grettis saga}, 215. For an argument that the \textit{heptisax} was originally wielded by Grettir, as Hrunting was by Beowulf, and described as the \textit{bjarlir gunnlagi}, see Jorgensen, ‘Grendel, Grettir’.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Guðni Jónsson, \textit{Grettis saga}, 215.
\end{itemize}
If Hrunting was adorned with representations of mistletoe specifically, it would presumably be close kin to the Old Norse sword Mistilteinn, a name which confirms an Old Norse concept of a mistletoe-sword. That sword, in turn, was probably a double or close relative both of the weapon called Lævateinn which Loki plucked from a tree, and the gambanteinn which Skírnir took from a sappy tree and used to overcome Gerðr, apparently after giving up on the self-animated sword given to him by Freyr.  

That ‘failed’ sword of Freyr, in turn, corresponds to Hrunting both descriptively (as Freyr’s weapon is mälfn, so Hrunting is wundenmæl ‘wound with signs’ or ‘adorned with winding signs’, 1531) and functionally, since both weapons fail to overcome a giantess with likely lunar associations.

I suggest that an explanation for this confusing web of relationships is that Hrunting was of fundamentally the same kind as Mistilteinn, and as the sword which Freyr gave to Skírnir, and as the gambanteinn. Given especially the apparent functional correspondence between Mistilteinn in Hrómundar saga Gripssonar and both Hrunting and the giant sword, Hrunting also seems closely related to the giant sword. However, just as Freyr’s sword was apparently weaker than the gambanteinn, so Hrunting was weaker than the giant sword, and therefore implicitly less radiant. Since Hrunting was too weak to overcome the moon-giantess (Grendel’s mother), it failed where the giant sword later succeeded at

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90 It is difficult to say whether, or how, any of these weapons might relate to the mistletoe-like aureus ramus ‘golden bough’, which Aeneas had to pluck and bring to the underworld goddess Proserpine, according to Virgil’s Aeneid (6.131–211); H. R. Fairclough (trans.), Virgil: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI, rev. edn. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999), 542–7. For discussion of this bough, see J. Z. Smith, ‘When the Bough Breaks’, History of Religions 12 (1973), 342–71. Also unclear is whether there is any distant connection with a model tree or branch with wooden stem and gilded bronze leaves from a pre-Roman Iron Age site at Manching in Bavaria, or with metallic leaves from other European sites; for these, see M. Aldhouse-Green, Seeing the Wood for the Trees: The Symbolism of Trees and Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain (Aberystwyth, 2000), 11.

91 Cf. Lehmann, ‘Atertanum Fah’, 227–8. Freyr’s ‘failed’ sword might also be connected with mistletoe because it was mjóvan ‘slender’ (Fr Skírnis 23, 25), rather as the mistletoe-weapon that slew Baldr was mjör and mær ‘slender’ (Vþluspá 31, 32).

92 Cf. Jorgensen, ‘Gift’, 89 for the view that the epithet hæftmece has ‘very likely’ been transferred to Hrunting from the sword in the cave. Additionally, Horowitz, ‘Sword Imagery’, 136 observes that ‘Everything about Hrunting seems to anticipate in small some characteristic … the giant sword’, and proceeds to compare and contrast them.
the hottest time of day, at or around *non dæges* ‘the ninth hour of the day’ (1600), about 3 p.m. The giant sword is described in similar terms to Hrunting—each, for instance, is a *hildebil* and *hringmæl* ‘ring-marked/adorned’ (1521, 1564). Also, the giant sword’s victorious melting on account of *heæþoswat* ‘battle-sweat, blood’ (1606, 1668) after beheading Grendel’s mother implicitly serves as an inverse complement to Hrunting’s hardening in *heæþoswat* (1460) before failing to achieve the same feat. The giant sword was undoubtedly larger than Hrunting, which suggests a greater potential radiance—a potential probably realized when it beheaded Grendel’s mother. In doing so, the giant sword superseded Hrunting, became what Hrunting formerly was: *an foran ealdgestreona* ‘unique before (all other) ancient-treasures’ (1458).

Other evidence also points to convergence between Hrunting and the giant sword:

(a) Both are in some sense *captive* swords whose hilts are emphasized. The giant sword is the likely subject of a theft, after which it was *hung* on the wall of the giants’ concealed lair and apparently never used; it also appears closely linked to the light and heat probably contained *within* the body of Grendel’s mother. Furthermore, it is reduced to its hilt after its blade melts. Comparably, Hrunting is a *hæftmece* (1457), a unique compound translatable as both ‘hilt(ed)-sword’ and ‘captive/imprisoned sword’.

(b) That Hrunting does not break when Beowulf uses it is testimony to its mighty strength, even if it cannot match that of the giant sword. Its worth is emphasized (1458–64). Beowulf’s successive blows with Hrunting and the giant sword may be compared with his successive blows with a *single* excellent sword, Nægling, against the dragon. Nægling initially fails to penetrate its target (compare Hrunting) and then shatters when it strikes the dragon a second time (compare the destruction of the giant sword’s blade, albeit by a wholly different process).

93 Cf. Gould, ‘*Beowulf* and Folktale Morphology’ on the poet’s supposed splitting of the Proppian donor-function between *Unferð* (with Hrunting) and God (with the giant sword).

(c) After Unferð has loaned Hrunting to Beowulf, the Geat reciprocates by instructing Hroðgar to give Unferð ealde lafe, / wætlic wægsweord ‘(my) old leaving, (my) marked wavesword’ (1488–9). The term wægsweord is found only here and is significant not only for its likely description of the wavy markings on a pattern-welded blade, which would make the sword a suitable replacement for Hrunting should Beowulf be unable to return the loaned weapon. It also hints, both retrospectively and proleptically, at an equivalence with other swords wielded by Beowulf. Thus, it refers back to the sword with which Beowulf slew the meredeor ‘mere-beast’ (558) at the bottom of a turbulent sea after being separated by waves from Breca ‘Breaker, Wave’; indeed, it could be the very same sword. That sword, we have seen, foreshadows the giant sword which killed Grendel’s mother. The term wægsweord also anticipates both the giant sword and Hrunting in that Beowulf returns with both weapons from the waves; it might even prefigure the giant sword hung on a wag ‘wall’ (1662) (compare wæg ‘wave’) in a subtle pun. It appears, then, that the single ‘wave-sword’ has a degree of identity with both Hrunting and the giant sword, and that the two swords brought from Grendel’s mere are thereby drawn into closer connection.

95 Cf. SASE5-7, 113–4. Note also ON vægir ‘wavy one’ and vægileiptr ‘wavy lightning’, poetic terms for ‘sword’; PTP, p. 796.

96 One might infer from mecum ... sweordum ‘with swords ... with swords’ (565, 567) that Beowulf wielded more than one sword during this episode (cf. Hrunting and the giant sword). KB, 153, however, sees ‘a “generic plural,” used for the logically correct sg., perhaps even hardened into a kind of epic formula’.

97 Note also that the weapon with which Beowulf cut the dragon in two was a weallseax ‘battle/slaughter-knife/short sword’ (2703)—does this unique word subtly pun on ‘wall-sword’ (weall/wæll ‘wall’)?

98 Note also Brimir, the æotr ... sverða ‘best/noblest/most powerful of swords’, according to the version of Grímnismál 44 found in the manuscript AM 748 I 44; also Brimir, the sword Óðinn once had with him when standing á bjargi ‘on a cliff/rock/mountain’, according to the Eddic poem Sigrdrífunál ‘Sayings of Sigrdrífa’ (14). Brimir, which is also a poetic term for ‘sword’ and the name of a giant (probably an alias of Ymir, from whose blood the sea was made), might be based on ON brim ‘surf’, which would suggest that the sword was closely associated with the sea and perhaps with an ancient giant. Another possible derivation, though, is from ON brimi/brími ‘burning, fire’; PTP, 798–9. Perhaps the name is purposefully ambiguous to denote a fiery sword from the sea.
(d) In *Grettis saga*, it is the *heptisax*—corresponding (albeit problematically) to Hrunting—which broke at the handle, not the sword hanging on the giant’s wall which corresponds more immediately to the giant sword. Furthermore, it may have been a piece of the broken wooden handle of the *heptisax* on which Grettir carved runes describing the giant’s defeat, a rune-stick on which he also recorded his extraction of human bones from the giant’s lair. He left this stick and the bagged bones in the local church’s porch, where they were read by the priest who had earlier left him for dead.\(^99\) If so, there is a parallel with Beowulf’s taking of the rune-inscribed hilt of the giant sword, symbolic of the resurrective Cross, to Heorot, where it is regarded by the pious, fatherly Hroðgar, after the hero had been abandoned by the men who had watched for his return at the surface of the mere. In other words, upon close examination, the Hrunting-equivalent of *Grettis saga* may have a good deal in common with Beowulf’s giant sword.

(e) In *Hjálmþés rímur* the name *Hrotti*, the likely Old Norse equivalent of *Hrunting*, is an alias of Snarvendill, the sword which chiefly parallels Beowulf’s giant sword.

These points of convergence raise the distinct possibility that Hrunting and the giant sword are (or were formerly) consubstantial. If so, the giant sword would essentially be a brighter, more powerful version of Hrunting. This could explain Beowulf’s descriptions of the giant sword as *eacen* ‘increased’ (1663) and as having *eacnum ecgum* ‘increased edges’ (2140)—it would command more sunlight, more solar power than Hrunting.\(^100\) If so, Hrunting and the giant sword are (or were originally) different not in kind but degree.\(^101\)

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100 Note also the *eacne cardas* ‘increased homes/tracts’ of the cleansed mere (1621), and that, fittingly, Beowulf was introduced as *eacen* (198). If the fire-dragon is interpretable on one level as a dimly shining creature of the waning or dark moon, one which hoards a treasure symbolic of sunlight, then that treasure’s description as *eacencraftig*, literally ‘increased in strength’ (3051), within *hordærna sum /eacencraftig* ‘a certain strength-increased hoard-house’ (2279–80), may also be noted.
101 From another perspective, the weapons perhaps also differ in rectitude, for whereas the giant sword was evidently bestowed on Beowulf by God as an instrument of divine justice, Hrunting was loaned to him by a fratricide. That said, the poet
If, in this study, I have found possible answers to some of the puzzles posed by the giant sword and Hrunting, no doubt many others remain unrecognized and unanswered. To some extent this is inevitable, given the wide variety, complexity and obscurity of many of the sources and source relationships, and the severely fragmented and dispersed nature of the surviving material. I think, with some diffidence, that this material somewhat resembles a jumble of worn and distorted pieces from complementary jigsaws, certain parts of which have been lost and others more or less accurately repaired or replaced by more or less adequate substitutes. The risks inherent in interpreting such material are many, some of which I have doubtless fallen victim to. Principal among them is the tendency toward ‘confirmation bias’, which renders the investigator more likely to perceive, and attribute significance to, similarities than differences in an endeavour to bring order to what may, in reality, sometimes simply be ‘unpatterned unrelated bric-a-brac’. Consequently, although I believe I have clarified and demonstrated the coherence in terms of celestial myth of many curious details in *Beowulf* and its analogues, I make no claim to present a complete, fully consistent or perfectly interpreted picture. But then, it seems most unlikely that the many traditions analyzed in this book were ever wholly consistent in their details, even if they share common themes.

However tentatively I present the findings in this book, I do hope to have made a persuasive overall case for the giant sword of *Beowulf* and Hrunting as having once been, from a Germanic perspective, kindred possessions of Ing/Yngvi-Freyr or at least of his circle. In turn, I hope to have demonstrated their symbolic roles in an underlying myth about an elemental struggle between the sun (represented by Ing, Hroðgar and Beowulf) and the moon (represented by Grendel, his mother and possibly the climactic dragon) for the possession of sunlight, one manifest in variant forms in other Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse texts. In *Beowulf* this myth is not, I emphasize, explicit—it serves as a back-story, an enriching native underpinning to the primary narrative and to the poet’s subtle Christian imagery. But its presence, which may have been far more apparent to Anglo-Saxons than it is

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today, nevertheless underlines the truth of one eminent scholar’s claim that the story of Beowulf is ‘far more mythical and fantastic than has been thought’.  

That confirmatory finding might alone justify the undertaking of this study. But I would go further, given that the image of the giant sword’s waning seems to intimate a melting candle (perhaps even the Paschal Candle), the Cross and more generally—if the poet implicitly identifies the dwindling blade as a lænan gesceaf ‘loaned creation’ (1622)—the transient nature of the whole of God’s created world. This structurally central image represents, I suggest, nothing less than the spiritual and thematic heart of Beowulf, and encapsulates what seems to me to be its essential message. I propose, in conclusion, that the key to understanding this message lies in the early Christian metaphorical significance of ice and its melting by fiery heat.

Roughly half a century ago, Thomas D. Hill examined the figurative meaning of images of heat and cold, fire and ice in Old English poetry against the background of the Christian writings of patristic authors. He observed that Anglo-Saxon and other medieval literatures display a ‘pattern of imagery in which heat and cold can express moral significance—the fiery hot love of perfect charity, and the icy cold of unrepentant sinfulness.’ This pattern derives ultimately from Biblical statements such as Matthew 24:12 et quoniam abundabit iniquitas refrigescet caritas multorum ‘and because iniquity will abound, the charity of many will cool’; Ecclesiasticus 3:17 sicut in sereno glacies solventur tua peccata ‘your sins shall melt away just like ice in fair weather’; and Jeremiah 6:7 sicut frigidam facit cisterna aquam suam sic frigidam fecit malitiam suam ‘As a cistern makes its water cold, so has she made her wickedness cold’. As Hill also observes: ‘The figurative conception that heat represents charity and cold its opposite, is a very widely used metaphor throughout patristic and early medieval

103 J. D. Niles, Beowulf and Lejre (Tempe, 2007), 225. It also suggests that, despite two centuries of scholarly scrutiny, Beowulf is not ‘mined out’, that it still contains hidden treasures which traditional philological and comparative approaches to early texts can reveal, if not in full detail, then at least in outline; cf. Drout et al., Beowulf Unlocked, 1.


exegetical and homiletic works’;\textsuperscript{107} this includes Old English and Old Norse texts.\textsuperscript{108}

Hill cites instances from the writings of Pope Gregory, who ‘discusses conversion [i.e., to Christianity] in terms of the ice of wickedness being melted’;\textsuperscript{109} Augustine of Hippo and others. I shall quote two instances.

In describing pre-Christian Britain, the sixth-century British monk Gildas wrote:

\begin{quote}
Interea glaciali frigore rigenti insulae et velut longiore terrarum secessu soli visibili non proximae verus ille non de firmamento solum temporalis ede de summa etiam caelorum arce tempora cuncta excedente universo orbi praefulgidum sui coruscum ostendens, tempore, ut scimus, summus Tiberii Caesaris, quo absque ullo impedimento eius propagabatur religio, comminata senatu nolente a principe morte delatoribus militum eiusdem, radios suos primum indulget, id est sua praecipita, Christus.
\end{quote}

Meanwhile, to an island [i.e., Britain] numb with chill ice and far removed, as in a remote nook of the world, from the visible sun, Christ made a present of his rays (that is, his precepts), Christ the true sun, which shows its dazzling brilliance to the entire earth, not from the temporal firmament merely, but from the highest citadel of heaven, that goes beyond all time. This happened first, as we know, in the last years of the emperor Tiberius, at a time when Christ’s religion was being propagated without hindrance: for against the wishes of the senate, the emperor threatened the death penalty for informers against soldiers of God.\textsuperscript{110}

In a sermon for the Easter vigil, Gaudentius of Brescia (died 410) wrote:\textsuperscript{111}

\begin{quote}
Opportuno tempore Dominus Jesus beatissimam festivitatem Paschae voluit celebrari, post autumni nebulam, post horrorem hiemis, ante aestatis
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{107} Hill, ‘Tropological Context’, 523.
\textsuperscript{109} Hill, ‘Tropological Context’, 524.
\textsuperscript{111} Gaudentius was one of many patristic authors whose work was known in Anglo-Saxon England; see M. Lapidge, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Library} (Oxford, 2006), 303.
The Lord Jesus wished the most blessed feast of the Pasch to be celebrated at an appropriate time, after the cloud of autumn, after the horror of winter, but before the heat of summer. For it was right that Christ, the Sun of Justice, should remove both the Jews’ mist and the ice of the pagans, before the heat of the future judgment, by the peaceful light of his own Resurrection; should recall to the state of primitive tranquility all things which had been thrown into confusion by a foul disguise from that prince of darkness. For in springtime God made the world.\textsuperscript{112}

Hill proposes ‘a possibility, although it is no more than that’ that the simile of the giant sword melting just like ice when God the Father loosens the bonds of frost ‘may allude to the conception of the ice of evil being melted away’.\textsuperscript{113} He adds: ‘Conclusive proof for this suggestion would obviously have to depend on an interpretation of the fight with Grendel’s mother as a whole; but since the simile is one of the most clear-cut Christian references in the poem, and occurs precisely at that moment when the forces of evil have been overcome, the possibility is at least worth considering.’\textsuperscript{114}

Conclusive proof of the validity of any interpretation of \textit{Beowulf}—a poem that ‘resists our intelligence quite successfully’\textsuperscript{115}—is rarely, if ever, forthcoming,\textsuperscript{116} which is perhaps why Hill’s perceptive suggestion seems to have been neglected. I can provide no proof of its validity, but I believe the findings of this study support it.

In my view, the image of the waning, melting giant sword subtly suggests multiple transformations—changes of state, conversions—paradoxically involving both violent, combustive change and gentler,

\textsuperscript{112} Text and translation from Nicholson, ‘Literal Meaning’, 183.
\textsuperscript{113} Hill, ‘Tropological Context’, 531.
\textsuperscript{114} Hill, ‘Tropological Context’, 531; see also Helder, ‘\textit{Beowulf} and Typological Symbolism’, 40–48.
\textsuperscript{115} Frank, ‘Scandal’, 864.
\textsuperscript{116} This is inevitable, since we face an embarrassment of fundamental unknowns: we do not know (and probably never shall) who composed \textit{Beowulf}, or why or how, or when or where (with any precision), or whether it was performed, or, if it was, why, when, how, by whom and for whom. These unknowns amount to a huge lack of known context.
melting transition. The remarkably rich image of the probably radiant giant sword which, if I interpret the symbolism correctly, becomes a simultaneously fiery and icy candle, which in turn becomes a shining hilt-Cross, emerges from and subsumes changes such as the following:

(a) The waning of the moon into dark nothingness. It is surely no coincidence that, at its demise, the giant sword which (like the Old Norse sword Angrvadill ‘Grief-Wane’) dispatches the lunar giants who formerly possessed it, is first said to wanian ‘wane’ (1607). Then, as now, this verb could describe the diminution of the moon. We may also compare the lunar imagery on the Bedale sword-hilt, which happens also to lack its blade.

(b) The waning of the sun as it is overtaken during a solar eclipse by the dark and implicitly icy moon, from whose shadow, however, it soon emerges. Again, we may compare the Bedale pommel.

(c) The death of Christ the Sun on the Cross and his resurrection in springtime.

(d) Cain’s fratricidal ecg ‘edge’ and the solar sword of Ing/Yngvi-Freyr into the Cross of Christ. This could be a case of turning a sword-like coulter into the Cross, rather than a sword into a ploughshare.

(e) The overcoming of the torments of Hell, both fiery and icy;¹¹⁷ possibly we should also imagine meltwater from the sword’s ‘battle-icicles’ as purifying the waters of the mere.

(f) The element-melting fire of the apocalypse which will signal the Lord’s return (2 Peter 3:10).

(g) Most fundamentally, the old, unenlightened, sinful, but partly redeemable, ‘icy’ world of Germanic paganism, which is purified by and subsumed into the warmth of Christianity.

I have presented here a personal, subjective, non-definitive list, as it seems to me that the image of the waning, melting giant sword is meant to be elusively allusive; there is no one interpretative key to unlock a specific meaning or meanings to this captivating image. At root, I suspect it was designed to inspire personal, nuanced reflection upon, and appreciation of, the possibility of accommodative transition from native heathenism to Christianity. If so, it would not be the only early Anglo-Saxon object to reflect such a transition or to provoke such thought. The Franks Casket from eighth-century Northumbria, for example, juxtaposes scenes of the mythological Germanic smith Weland (maker of Beowulf’s mail-coat) and the Adoration of the Magi. Many readers will doubtless also be familiar with images of a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon helmet from Benty Grange, Derbyshire, photographs of which in its surviving, incomplete state are often published. It is surmounted by a gilded boar-figurine, which prompts comparison with the boar-adorned helmets of Beowulf and the radiant boar-steeds of Freyr and Freyja. But what is less well known is that the same helmet

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118 With the potentially many-layered complexity of the poem’s sword-imagery, compare Pope Gregory’s complicated thoughts on swords, which include references to an *immutatio* *g*la*dius* ‘sword of conversion’ (*Moralia on Job* 25.16 in *PL* 76, column 329), a *sanc*ta*e* pr*æ*dication*is gla*dius* ‘sword of holy preaching’ and a *diabolica* *p*ersuasion*is gla*dius* ‘sword of diabolical persuasion’ (34.17, *PL* 76, column 726).

119 For photographs and discussion, see R. Abels, ‘What Has Weland to Do with Christ? The Franks Casket and the Acculturation of Christianity in Early Anglo-Saxon England’, *Speculum* 84 (2009), 549–81, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0038713400209305. Abels observes (581): ‘The Christianity that took root in England in the seventh and eighth centuries represented more than a superficial syncretism in which Christianity transformed to its uses native culture; rather, it was a fusion of different cultures in which Christianity itself was profoundly transformed.’ See also B. Yorke, ‘Ingeld, Weland and Christ’, *Quaestio Insularis* 14 (2013), 1–14; B. Yorke, ‘The Fate of Otherworldly Beings after the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons’, in C. Ruhmann and V. Brieske (ed.), *Dying Gods: Religious Beliefs in Northern and Eastern Europe in the Time of Christianisation* (Hannover, 2015), 167–75; Risden, *Beasts of Time*, 43.

120 As, for example, in *KB*, xv, fig. 7.

121 The seventh-century ‘Pioneer’ helmet from Wollaston, Northamptonshire is also topped by a boar-figurine; see J. E. Saraceni, ‘Saxon Helmet Restored’, *Archaeology* 50 (1997), http://archive.archaeology.org/9711/newsbriefs/saxon.html; Meadows, *Pioneer Burial*, 17–31, 58–61. For a sixth- or seventh-century boar-figurine which may have topped another Anglo-Saxon helmet, see J. Foster, ‘A Boar Figurine from Guilden Morden, Camb’s’, *Medieval Archaeology* 21 (1977), 166–7. Also comparable are the Sutton Hoo helmet’s ‘eyebrows’ in the form of boars with golden heads. By contrast, warriors depicted on helmet-fittings from the Staffordshire hoard wear helmets topped by raptors; see C. Fern, A. Osinska, L. Martin and G. Speake,
originally had another key feature: a large silver Cross on its noseguard (see Figure 6). As such, this artefact represents a remarkable example of—possibly Ing-related—heathen and Christian syncretism from a time and place with which the poet of Beowulf could have been familiar.

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If my findings about the significance of the waning giant sword are broadly correct, they strengthen the widely accepted perception that *Beowulf* is a richly thought-provoking blend of Christian and heathen themes. Its subtle symbolism conveys to me an implicitly redemptive message about how the icy coldness of heathenism may ‘melt’ into the blazing Cross of Christ, a message suggestive of a measured, humane approach to religious conversion in keeping with the pragmatic *modus operandi* of the Gregorian Mission to England. Any readers who entertain the conclusions of this long study, but whose thoughts have before now wandered to Eddard Stark’s sword ‘Ice’—or, indeed, to Robert Frost’s thoughts on how the world will end¹²⁴—may find it congenial to reflect that the central importance of the image of the waning sword to *Beowulf* makes this greatest of Old English poems the original ‘song of ice and fire’.¹²⁵


¹²⁵ We first meet the ancient, huge and justice-dispensing sword Ice, which is cleaned in a divine wood and ultimately melted down, in G. R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones: Book One of a Song of Ice and Fire* (1996, rpt. London, 2011), 12. Only shortly before Ice’s introduction, we read that a White Walker’s ice-crystal sword was ‘alive with moonlight’ (8–10).