Supplementary Observations

Below I record observations supplementary to those made in The Waning Sword. These observations have not been peer-reviewed. Any mistakes are solely my responsibility.

Edward Pettit

Update 3 (19 April 2021)

A Neglected Analogue to Beowulf’s Mere-Episode in Æðreks saga af Bern

Scholars have adduced various analogues to episodes of Beowulf, including its mere-episode, in the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Norwegian Æðreks saga af Bern ‘Saga of Æþrekr from Verona’. However, they may have overlooked one likely analogue in this saga to the mere-episode, judging from the scholarship that I have been able to review.

In summary, chapters 17 to 18 of Æðreks saga record that the eponymous hero and his fosterfather, Hildibrandr, were out hunting a hart with hounds one day when Æþrekr saw a dwarf, whom he chased and caught. The dwarf, identified as Álfrekr ‘inn mikli stelari’ Álfrekr the great thief’, most skilful of dwarves, bargained for his life. He offered to show Æþrekr to a great store of treasure that was in the possession of an evil couple, the couple being a man (berserkr) called Grímr, who had the strength of twelve men, and his even stronger and trollish wife, Hildr. Grímr had a sword called Naglhringr ‘Nail-Ring’, allra sverða bezt ‘the best of all swords’, which Álfrekr had made himself. Álfrekr said that Æþrekr would need Grímr’s sword if he was to win victory. Æþrekr then set the dwarf free, on condition that he bring him Naglhringr the same day. Æþrekr then hunted animals til nón ‘until three o’clock in the afternoon’, whereupon, eftir nón ‘after three o’clock in the afternoon’, Álfrekr returned with Naglhringr, which he gave to Æþrekr. The dwarf then directed them to a jarðhús ‘earth-house’ concealed in a mountainside, and at once disappeared.

Æþrekr and Hildibrandr armed themselves and went inside. Having noticed their arrival, Grímr went to his weapon chest, only to find his sword missing: ok kemr honum nú í hug, at

---

1 See Garmonsway, Simpson and Ellis Davidson, Beowulf and its Analogues, 280-5, 286-97, 335; Orchard, Critical Companion, 116; J. Hobson, ‘An Old Norse Courtly Analogue to Beowulf’, Neophilologus 103 (2019), 577-90, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331394620_An_Old_Norse_Courtly_Analogue_to_Beowulf. SASE and SASE5-7 refer to the saga more than once, but not to the episode discussed here. The saga, which draws on both German and Norse traditions, is not mentioned in Stitt, Beowulf and the Bear’s Son, Magnús Fjalldal, ‘Beowulf and the Old Norse Two-Troll Analogues’, or Björk and Niles, Beowulf Handbook.

2 The analogue also merits comparison with the episode in the U-version of Heidreks saga discussed in Chapter 13 of The Waning Sword.

3 For editions of the saga, see H. Bertelsen, ed., Æðriks saga af Bern, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1905-11); Guðni Jónsson, ed., Æðreks saga af Bern, 2 vols. ([Reykjavík], 1954). I quote from the latter. For an English translation, see E. R. Haymes, trans., The Saga of Thidrek of Bern (New York, 1988), though it mistranslates Jónsson’s chapter heading Álfrekr færði Æþreki sverði Naglhring as ‘Álfrek makes the sword Naglhring for Thidrek’ (it should be ‘Álfrek brought the sword Naglhring to Thidrek’). This saga was adapted into Swedish in the fifteenth century; see G. O. Hyltén-Cavallius, ed., Sagan om Didrik af Bern (Stockholm, 1850-4); I. Cumpstey, trans., The Saga of Didrik of Bern: with The Dwarf King Laurin (Cumbria, 2017); this episode is chapter 13 therein.

4 So Guðni Jónsson’s reading edition (this form of the name invites the suggestion that the dwarf became known as a little ‘shit’ (cf. ON álfrek ‘excrement’, literally ‘that which drives an elf (away)’); Bertelsen’s critical edition has Alfriggur (as Alpris in the critical apparatus). Whichever form is chosen, it is probably a Norse manifestation of the Nibelungenlied’s Alb(e)rich ‘Elf Mighty One’, dwarf-guardian of the Nibelung treasure.
stolit mun hafa Álfrekr dvergr inn mikli stelari ‘and it comes now into his mind that the dwarf Álfrekr, the great thief, must have stolen it’. Grímr therefore seized a burning log from the fire, and the foes fought. Hildibrandr wrestled with Hildr, until he fell and she came down on top of him and began to compress him. After momentarily losing consciousness, he called to Þiðrekr for help. Þiðrekr promptly beheaded Grímr and, at the third attempt, bisected Hildr permanently, having been instructed by Hildibrandr to place his feet between her severed head and torso to prevent them rejoining. The victorious pair took much treasure from there, including a remarkable helmet called Hildigrímr.

Although there are obviously many differences between this story and the Beowulf’s mere-episode (there is, for example, no mere in the saga and no dwarf in Beowulf), readers will spot many parallels to Beowulf’s mere-episode. We may especially compare:

a) The hound-assisted stag-hunt at the start of the episode with the hounds’ pursuit of a stag before the hero’s descent into the mere in Beowulf (1368-72).

b) The dwarf’s presentation of Naglhringr to Þiðrekr after nón with Beowulf’s discovery (God’s revelation) of the giant sword around non (Beowulf 1600).

c) Þiðrekr with Beowulf.

d) Grímr with Grendel. In addition to their obvious similarities, note that both bear fire, albeit in different ways.

e) Hildr with Grendel’s mother.

f) Hildibrandr ‘Battle-Brand’ with the hildebil Hrunting (1520), which, as a shining sword, might also be a brand (although it is not called such explicitly). As Hildibrandr fails against Hildr, Hrunting fails against Grendel’s mother (note Beowulf’s admission that Ne meahte ic at hilde mid Hruntinge / wiht gewyrcan ‘I could not accomplish anything in hild “battle” with Hrunting’ (1659-60a)). Also, both Hildibrandr and Hrunting end up on the ground, but are rescued by Þiðrekr and Beowulf, respectively. The obscurity of the correspondence between Hildibrandr and Hrunting may explain why the whole analogue has perhaps been overlooked.

g) Hildr’s wrestling with, and compression of, Hildibrandr with Grendel’s mother’s ‘mare’-like attack on Beowulf.

h) The beheadings of the monsters (although they occur in different order).

i) The taking of the helmet Hildigrímr with Beowulf’s taking of the head of Grendel. The saga states that the helmet was named after both Hildr and Grímr, and subsequently worn by Þiðrekr.

j) The peerless sword Naglhringr not just with the peerless giant sword but also with Nægling, although Nægling (discussed in The Waning Sword) is not named in the mere-episode.5 (The parallel with Nægling has been noted before; see the Glossary in KB.)

Given these variations on the story told in Beowulf, it is of great interest that the peerless sword Naglhringr is the subject of a theft by its maker, a dwarf, from the very giant for whom he had forged it.6 In The Waning Sword I suggest that, in the back-story to Beowulf, the comparable

---

5 With -hringr in Haglhringr compare the cognate hringmæl describing the giant sword in Beowulf 1564.

6 Later, in chapter 98 of Þiðreks saga, we learn of another marvellous sword, Ekkisax ‘Edge(d) Seax’, which was also made by Álfrekr, and which he had later stolen from his father, hidden for a long time, and then given to a king.
giant sword was the subject of a theft by Grendel (or his mother), one of the race of giants who had forged it, from the very god for whom they had forged it.

‘He Did Not Withhold Treasure in his Swing’, *Beowulf* 1520b

Regrettably, I overlooked the following article when writing *The Waning Sword*: J. R. Hall, ‘The Sword Hrunting in *Beowulf*: Unlocking the Word hord’, *Studies in Philology* 109 (2012), 1-18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41511592. Hall argues persuasively that in *Beowulf* 1520b the manuscript readings *hord* and *swenge* should be retained, so that this half-line reads *hord swenge ne ofteah*, not emended to *hond sweng ne ofteah* ‘his hand did not withhold the swing/blow’ as in KB. Hall translates the unemended manuscript text as ‘[Beowulf] did not withhold the treasure in his swing’, the ‘treasure’ being the sword Hrunting.

If Hall’s interpretation is accepted, it strengthens the correspondence, detailed in Chapter 7 of *The Waning Sword*, between the mere-episode of *Beowulf* and the Old Norse Eddic poem *Fǫr Skírn*is. It now appears that, contrary to what I say on p. 177 (‘Beowulf offered Grendel’s mother no treasures …’), Beowulf *did* offer Grendel’s mother treasure (*hord*), albeit in an ironic sense, in the form of a blow from the precious sword Hrunting, which made no impression on her. Comparably, at a corresponding point in *Fǫr Skírn*is, Skírnir offered the giantess Gerðr precious gifts, immediately before threatening to strike her with a sword. His gifts were eleven golden apples (or apples of eternal youth) and an implicitly golden ring which had been burnt on Baldr’s pyre and which dripped eight equally heavy rings every ninth night—all of which Gerðr immediately rejected (*Fǫr Skírn*is 19-23).

Furthermore, although Skírnir’s apples find no parallel in *Beowulf*, the ring that he offers may well do, given how the passage in *Beowulf* continues:

> … *hord swenge ne ofteah,*  
> þæt hire on hafelan  hringmæl agol  
> grædig guôleoð. (1520b-1522a)

> … he did not withhold (the) treasure in his swing, so that on her head *hringmæl* sang a greedy battle-lay.

The compound *hringmæl* (*hring* + *mæl*) appears only three times in surviving Old English literature, and only in *Beowulf*, each time in connection with a sword or swords: 7 (1) here, in connection with Hrunting; (2) shortly afterwards, in line 1564, where it describes the giant sword; and in line 2037, where it describes an aspect of shining swords worn by Danes. *Hring* is a noun meaning ‘ring’; -*mæl* is presumably *mæl* ‘mark’, a noun cognate with the first element of ON *málfár* ‘mark/sign-coloured’ (i.e., colourful/decorated with signs), an adjective used to describe the very sword with which Skírnir threatens Gerðr in *Fǫr Skírn*is (23). Most likely, therefore, *hringmæl* describes a sword ‘marked’ by a ring or rings or curving designs, whether a ring was attached to its pommel, rings encased its grip, or curving designs were visible on

---

7 Note also, however, *hringmæled* in the poem *Genesis A* (line 1992), which also describes a sword.
its pattern-welded blade.\textsuperscript{8} Whichever is the case, Hrunting apparently bore some form of ring, which strengthens the parallel with \textit{Fyr Skírnis}.

Given the long list of sequential parallels between \textit{Beowulf} and \textit{Fyr Skírnis} identified in Chapter 7, and the \textit{Beowulf}-poet’s apparent liking for ambiguity, a further possibility may be entertained. Since OE \textit{mæl} can also mean ‘speech, talk, conversation, suit’ (among other things), perhaps this first instance of \textit{hringmæl} in \textit{Beowulf} partly functions as an allusion to a ‘ring-speech’, a counterpart to Skírnir’s speech offering the marvellous ring in \textit{Fyr Skírnis} 21. Especially if such a speech were previously known to the poet’s audience, they might hear:

\texttt{… hord swenge ne ofteah,} \\
\texttt{þæt hire on hafelan hringmæl agol,} \\
\texttt{grædig guðleoð.}

he did not withhold (the) treasure in his swing, so that on her head he/it sang a/the ring-speech, a/the greedy battle-lay.

Skírnir’s speech to Gerðr was, of course, at once generous with a ring and acquisitively violent with the threat of decapitation by his sword.

Whether or not this allusion is present, it now appears that the list of correspondences on pp. 182-4 of \textit{The Waning Sword} should be amended to include the (admittedly inexact) parallel between Beowulf’s ironic gift to Grendel’s mother of a singing blow from the ring-adorned treasure Hrunting, which she rebuffs, and Skírnir’s sincere offer of a precious ring to Gerðr, which she rejects.

\textbf{More Cross-Adorned Pommels}

The following webpages illustrate further examples of swords with cross-adorned pommels (no doubt other examples exist):

- \texttt{https://www.tf.uni-kiel.de/matwis/amat/iss/kap_b/illustr/ib_3_1.html#_10} (scroll to top of page)
- \texttt{https://www.tf.uni-kiel.de/matwis/amat/iss/kap_b/illustr/ib_3_1.pdf}

\textbf{The ‘Sheared’ Moon in \textit{Völundarkviða}}

The Old Norse Eddic poem \textit{Völundarkviða} ‘The Lay of Völnudr’ describes the kidnapping of an elven smith called Völnudr (equivalent to Weland, maker of Beowulf’s mailcoat in \textit{Beowulf} 455) by a Swedish king called Niðuðr. Stanza 6 reads:

\texttt{Þat spyrr Niðuðr, Njára dróttinn,} \\
\texttt{at einn Völundr sat í Úlfððlum;}

\textsuperscript{8} See the discussion of \textit{hringmæl} and other sword-terms in \textit{SASE}, 121-9.
nóttum fóru seggir, negldar váru brynjur,
skildir bliku þeira við inn skarða mána.

Niðuðr, lord of the Njárar [a Swedish tribe], learned this, that Völundr stayed alone in Úlfdalir ‘Wolf-Dales’; men set out by night, their mail-coats were nailed, their shields shone with [the light of] the sheared moon.

This stanza is of interest for three reasons:

1. The adjective skarða, literally ‘sheared’, reflects the idea that the waning moon was ‘cut away’, implicitly by an edged weapon; the word is related to ON skerða ‘to cut away’, also skerja ‘to scratch, cut’ and skera ‘to shear’.

2. It was under a waning moon that Niðuðr’s men set out to capture Völundr, whom they stole from, shackled as he slept, and abducted from his hall. Similarly, Grendel and his mother were, in my view, thieves of the waning or dark moon who took sleeping men from Heorot.

3. Although the noun nið ‘waning/dark moon’ never appears in Völundarkviða, given the likely word-play on nið ‘hostile/hostility’ and nið ‘waning/dark moon’ in other texts examined in *The Waning Sword*, it may be worth noting that Niðuðr (possibly < *nið-hǫðr ‘hostile warrior’) is introduced in a stanza in which his men advance under a waning moon.

*Sinmara ‘Cinder/Slag Mara’*

In Chapter 8, p. 202 of *The Waning Sword* I entertained the possible meanings ‘Sinew/Perpetual/Great (Night)mare’ for Sinmara, the pale giantess of *Svipdagsmál*. Regrettably, I overlooked another, more attractive possibility (pace *ANEW* s.v. *Sinmara*). This is that, just as the element Sin- in the hero-name *Sinfjötli* may derive from sindr ‘cinder, slag’, so *Sinmara* may originally have been *Sindrmara* ‘Cinder/Slag (Night)mare’, as proposed by S. Gutenbrunner, ‘Eddica’, in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 77 (1940), 12-25 at 17-18. This meaning would seem compatible with the giantess’s close association with the fire-demon Surtr. It would also suggest affinity with the other Norse giantesses closely associated with glowing embers, ash, latent heat and ironworking, whom I mention in the book.

*The ‘Sea-She-Wolf’ and the Grasping Waters*

In Chapter 15 of *The Waning Sword*, I argue for a degree of identity between Grendel’s violent, grasping mother and the violent, grasping waters beneath which she lives. In this regard, a suggestive comparison is afforded by the Old Norse Eddic poem *Grímnismál*. It lists the names of mythological rivers which stem from *Hvergelmir* ‘Cauldron/Basin Roarer’, which in turn is filled by drops from the horns of the hart Eikþyrnir, which stands on Óðinn’s hall (26). These rivers *falla gummum nær, en falla til Heljar heðan* ‘fall/flow near men, and fall/flow hence [i.e., from the world of men] to Hel’ (28).
Among the rivers are the rhyming pair *Sylgr ok Ylgr* ‘Sylgr and Ylgr’. *Sylgr* is etymologically the ‘Swallower’, its name being derived from the Old Norse verb *svelgja* ‘to swallow’ (preterite plural *sulgu*).\(^9\) *Ylgr* is otherwise attested as an Old Norse noun meaning ‘she-wolf’.\(^10\) Here, then, we have a she-wolf (river) paired with a swallowing river. Comparably, I suggest, in *Beowulf*, Grendel’s mother is a *brimwylf* ‘sea-she-wolf’ who inhabits a body of water analogous to a swallowing whirlpool which, like her, draws Beowulf down to its hellish depths. Furthermore, her environs contain a *fyrgenstream* ‘mountain stream’ (though apparently only one) which passes down under the earth (1359-61), implicitly from the world of men towards the underworld of Hell.

Whether an analogy between Grendel’s fiery, turbulent mere and the implicitly boiling and turbulent Hvergelmir may also be entertained is unclear. Any relationship between the hart surmounting Óðinn’s hall and the (similarly adorned?) hall of *Heorot* ‘Hart’, not far from Grendel’s mere, is similarly obscure.

### The Baptism of Norna-Gestr and the Melting of a Candle

In *The Waning Sword* I argue that the melting giant sword is subtly likened to a burning candle in an episode symbolic of the death and rebirth, through baptism, of the noble heathen hero, and more broadly of the transition from paganism to Christianity. Although there is no sword-candle analogy and I make no direct or indirect connection with *Beowulf*, a candle is put to somewhat similar use in the Old Norse *Nornages̄t þátttr* ‘Tale of Nornagestr’, a story which may have been composed in the early fourteenth century.\(^11\)

We read that *Nornages̄tr* ‘Guest of the Nornir [supernatural females who govern men’s fates]’ was a heathen of three hundred years who knew stories of pagan heroes and heroines from the Germanic past. He had been ‘prime-signed’—a ceremony preliminary to baptism—but not yet baptized. Owing to a dispute between the Nornir when he was an infant, he was fated to die when a certain candle had melted away. That candle was promptly extinguished by one of the benevolent Nornir, who gave it to Nornagestr’s mother, who later gave it to him. In the story’s penultimate chapter, Nornagestr is baptized at the court of the Norwegian king and becomes a good Christian. Then, in the final chapter, his candle is lit. It burns quickly and he dies at the moment it goes out.

---


\(^10\) Hale, ‘River Names’, 180, which compares the Norwegian river names *Ulva* and *Ulvæn* and the Swedish lake *Ulven*, all of which derive from ON *ulfr* ‘wolf’.

\(^11\) For the text, see *FSN*, I, 305-55. For a translation and commentary, see J. Harris, ‘The Thátttr of Nornagestr’, [http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~ext12129/Thattr/ThattractorNornagestr.html](http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~ext12129/Thattr/ThattractorNornagestr.html)