

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 These observations have not been peer-reviewed.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

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A Neglected Analogue to *Beowulf*'s Mere-Episode in *Þiðreks 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 *Þiðreks saga af Bern* 'Saga of Þiðrekr from Verona'.¹ However, they may have overlooked one likely analogue in this saga to the mere-episode,² judging from the scholarship that I have been able to review.

In summary, chapters 17 to 18 of *Þiðreks saga* record that the eponymous hero and his fosterfather, Hildibrandr, were out hunting a hart with hounds one day when Þiðrekr saw a dwarf, whom he chased and caught.³ The dwarf, identified as *Álfrekr⁴ inn mikli stelari* 'Álfrekr the great thief', most skilful of dwarves, bargained for his life. He offered to show Þiðrekr to a great store of treasure that was in the possession of an evil couple, the couple being a man (berserk) called Grímr, who had the strength of twelve men, and his even stronger and trollish wife, Hildir. Grímr had a sword called *Naglhringr* 'Nail-Ring', *allra sverða bezt* 'the best of all swords', which Álfrekr had made himself. Álfrekr said that Þiðrekr would need Grímr's sword if he was to win victory. Þiðrekr then set the dwarf free, on condition that he bring him *Naglhringr* the same day. Þiðrekr 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 Þiðrekr. The dwarf then directed them to a *jarðhús* 'earth-house' concealed in a mountainside, and at once disappeared.

Þiðrekr 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 Bjork and Niles, *Beowulf Handbook*.

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

³ For editions of the saga, see H. Bertelsen, ed., *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1905-11); Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Þiðreks 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 Þiðreki sverðit Naglhring* as 'Alfrek makes the sword Naglhring for Thidrek' (it should be 'Alfrek 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 *álfræk* 'excrement', literally 'that which drives an elf (away)'); Bertelsen's critical edition has *Alfriggur* (also *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 æt hilde mid Hruntinge / wiht gewyrca*n '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 wresting 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 *För Skírnis*. 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 *För Skírnis*, 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 (*För Skírnis* 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 guðleoð. (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 *För Skírnis* (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.⁸ Whichever is the case, Hrunting apparently bore some form of ring, which strengthens the parallel with *Fōr Skírnis*.

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

... hord swenge ne ofteah,
þæt hire on hafelan hringmæl agol,
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 *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.

More Cross-Adorned Pommels

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

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

The 'Sheared' Moon in *Vǫlundarkviða*

The Old Norse Eddic poem *Vǫlundarkviða* 'The Lay of Vǫlundr' describes the kidnapping of an elven smith called Vǫlundr (equivalent to Weland, maker of Beowulf's mailcoat in *Beowulf* 455) by a Swedish king called Níðuðr. Stanza 6 reads:

Þat spyrr Níðuðr, Njára dróttinn,
at einn Vǫlundr sat í Úlfdǫlum;

⁸ See the discussion of *hringmæl* and other sword-terms in *SASE*, 121-9.

nóttum fóru seggir, negldar váru brynjur,
skildir bliku þeira við inn skarða mána.

Níðuðr, lord of the Njárar [a Swedish tribe], learned this, that Vǫlundr 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 Níðuðr's men set out to capture Vǫlundr, 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 *Vǫlundarkviða*, 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 *Níðuðr* (possibly < **níð-høðr* '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 gumnum 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 *fyrge stream* '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 *Nornagests þáttur* 'Tale of Nornagestr', a story which may have been composed in the early fourteenth century.¹¹

We read that *Nornagestr* '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.

⁹ See C. S. Hale, 'The River Names in *Grímnismál* 27-29', in R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason, ed., *Edda: a Collection of Essays* (Manitoba, 1983), 165-86 at 179-80.

¹⁰ Hale, 'River Names', 180, which compares the Norwegian river names *Ulva* and *Ulvaaen* 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 Tháttur of Nornagestr', <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~ext12129/Thattr/ThattrofNornagest.html>