

Joseph Harris
Harvard University

The Rök Stone's Mythology of Death

Abstract:

The Rök Stone (Östergötland, Sweden, 801-c. 850) bears the longest of all runic inscriptions and one of the most fruitful for our understanding of the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia. While it is true that almost everything about the inscription is controversial, I am confident that my series of recent articles form an adequately secure basis for the interpretation of Rök's mythology and beliefs on the subject of death. The talk will situate Rök among various Germanic mythologies of death more generally, with special attention to the Baldr myth, in particular to the Baldr-figure's slayer, designated a *iatunn* in this text. Some effort at wider, extra-Germanic comparisons will be made, centered principally on this demonic figure.

This presentation, not an article for publication and only partly a project in progress toward publication, will first (section I) summarize my understanding of the content, context, and message of the Rök inscription based on my three recent articles on Rök and the scholarship they build on (see the short Rök bibliography on the handout). Then (section II) I will elaborate my understanding of Rök's concluding myth and that myth's place in Germanic mythology more broadly. Section III will attend to details of Rök's image of death, and finally section IV will introduce some comparative, that is, non-Germanic, material to test or support my hypotheses on Rök's mythology of death. My hope is to draw from my audience in Ravenstein many further suggestions of cross-cultural parallels as well, of course, as to test my hypotheses on a formidable audience.

I. The Rök stone is a mighty slab of granite bearing a long inscription—the longest of any rune stone—in about 750 runes, with a text of interest not only to runologists and linguists, but also to comparative mythologists and literary historians. It was raised as a memorial in the first half of the ninth century, as generally dated, or perhaps more precisely 810–20 (Grønvik 2003). It stands now on the western edge of East Gautland (Östergötland) near the great central lake Vättern; the chances are that it was originally positioned beside a segment of the Swedish royal route, the *Erikskata*, where it crossed a small stream just north of the stone's present position in the church-yard of the hamlet of Rök, but a number of factors, including local place names apparently echoed in the inscription, make it unlikely that it has ever been moved far from its origin. The stone's four sides are completely covered with runes, as is the top, which stands almost two and a half meters above the earth. The five faces (labeled A-E) are to be read, generally, in alphabetical order, though the order becomes more complicated as the inscription nears its end; I adopt the consecutive line numbering, 1-28, from Wessén, whose discussion-edition of 1958 is the closest thing to a 'standard' in Rök scholarship. (Ultimately I argue, in Harris 2006, for a reading order 1-26, 28-27, which more rigorously keeps face E for the conclusion. See the text on the handout.) Faces A-B and most of C are written in a variant of the 16-rune younger *futhark* or alphabet known as short-twig runes and the sub-variant known as Rök runes. But beginning with line 21 on face C the remainder of the inscription is predominantly in cipher. The reader is clearly meant to begin with the large vertical lines 1-8 of side A, progress to the horizontal lines 9-10 of A and go on

to the syntactic and semantic continuation on line 11 of side B. This segment A-B also forms a complete sense unit. Next we are intended to continue reading the Rök runes in the similar arrangement on C with the vertical lines 12-19; lines 12-19 also form a separate and coherent sense unit. Line 20 is the only severely damaged part of the inscription, but almost certainly it constitutes an introduction to the cipher section, lines 21-28.

The third section of the inscription, the cipher section, is written in three different types of cipher and distributed in a less transparent arrangement (see the diagram on the handout). First, lines 21-22 are in a uniquely modified version of the older, 24-character *futhark*, thus not a genuine cipher, at all. Second, lines 23-24 and the beginning of 25 (25a) are basically in shift cipher, but alternating with ordinary unshifted Rök runes (24a and 25a). (In shift cipher each rune stands for the next rune in the standard order, as if A stood for B, B for C, and so on.) At 25b the inscription switches to the third type of cipher, coordinates cipher, which continues to the end of the inscription, sparsely interlarded with ordinary Rök runes. (The 16-rune *futhark* was arranged in three ‘families’, usually numbered 1-3, though often reversed, 3-1. In coordinates cipher [sometimes called numerical cipher] any rune can be designated by its position in a family, as ‘3-2’ for the second rune in the third family.) The coordinates-ciphered lines on Rök are realized in four different modes: 1) simple repetition of runes; 2) the number of twigs branching off an upright stave at top and bottom (I compared this sign to a medieval key in Harris 2006 and forthcoming a, but it is based on the pothook [*Kesselhaken*] used to hang a kettle over a fire and is known to runologists as *hahalruna*); 3) the *hahal*-runes themselves repeated in a layered arrangement; and 4) the *hahal*-runes crossed to yield a bold ‘windmill’ figure. The runemaster seems to have arranged the cipher forms of 21-28 according to increasing difficulty of decipherment, and that difficulty is coordinated with the complex graphic design of the cipher section.

The whole inscription is thus structured as an Introduction or dedication (A 1-2) and three sections unified by graphic arrangement, runes used, and semantic content: Section 1: simple Rök runes, front and right side, A-B 3-11; Section 2: simple Rök runes, back side, C 12-19; Section 3: cipher in increasingly difficult forms, back, left side, top, top of back C 21-25, D 26, E 27-C28 (so Wessén) or C 21-25, D26, C 28-E27 (so Harris 2006). In addition, each of the three ‘narrative’ sections is structured as two questions or questioning hints followed by an answer. We turn now to content and its interpretation.

The first two narrative sections deal with heroic material like that of Germanic heroic and eulogistic poetry found in West Germanic sources and elsewhere in North Germanic. While every aspect of Rök has been furiously debated, one can safely say that Sections 1 and 2 are less contentious than Section 3 and that they contrast with 3 in being drawn from the heroic, that is human, world. They also contrast with Section 3 in having item numbers attached to them, as if they represented selections from the same itemized repertoire of heroic lore, while the unnumbered Section 3 comprises mythic material and is drawn from a different store. Other Norse sources, notably the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* but also the Gotland picture stones and several mythic-heroic sagas, evince a similar juxtapositioning of heroic and mythic narrative even while maintaining the distinction between human actions and sacred story. Thematically,

however, all three sections make literary sense both individually and in juxtaposition, and it will come as no surprise that death-and-life is the unifying subject of this funeral or memorial inscription as a whole. The dedicatory lines tell us unambiguously that the stone was raised and the runes cut by Varinn, a father in memory of his “death-doomed” (*feigr*) son Vámóðr. The body of the inscription in its three narrative sections is a small anthology of heroic-mythic stories or *minni* produced for Varinn’s *mogr* ‘descendant’, an emotion-laden word found in early poetry and at least once in an earlier funeral inscription. The stories, however, could not be related in detail on stone. Instead, they are evoked by hinting questions and brief answers in a version of a skaldic routine or game known as *greppa-minni*, cf. *mog-minni*. Vámóðr may have been very young (*mogr* also means ‘boy’); and the playful routine may be evoking some favorite tales as a kind of gift of story for the dead. But the thematic connections and sense of the whole are serious and religious in a sense deeper than cult. I will return to the meaning of the whole after discussion the more difficult mythic material of the cipher section. (For a thematic summary see the Excursus following section II below.)

II. After a long, detailed, and contentious discussion of the narrative content of lines 21-28 (in Harris 2006), I arrived at the interpretative translation on the handout and the following conclusions: The myth alluded to is a local, East Gautish version of the divine death we know best from the West Nordic Baldr myths. That story has five actors: 1) a bereaved father; 2) a beloved son dead before his time; 3) his slayer; 4) a brother born later and dedicated to a mission related to the slain brother; and 5) the mother of the late-born brother. Analogues of all these figures are alluded to in Rök 21-28, and their actions track, up to a point, with those of the western versions of what we inevitably think of as the Baldr myth. But we consider first the **actions** attested in the Rök inscription.

On Rök the essential actions are the slaying of a (young) man (24-25) and the birth of a ‘descendant’ (*niðr*; 23-24). The descendant is engendered (*ol*; 28) by a very holy Kinsman (27) at the age of ninety (28).

We may go two steps further and say that the new *niðr* is born “for” a gallant young man (*drængi*, a dat. of advantage; 24) and that, since the “shrine-respecting Kinsman” (27) is a new (though old) father, the newborn *niðr* is the (half) brother of the dead youth “for whom” he is born. Parallels in diction, content, and ritual function in the famous Icelandic “Lament for Sons” (*Sonatorrek*), a well-attested and thoroughly studied poem of c. 961, help to clarify these events as alluding to an ancient belief to the effect that *the only recompense for a dead son is another engendered specifically to replace the lost one*.

We now consider the five actors.

In the western versions of Snorri and Saxo, **the mother** is called Rindr/Rinda; and to fulfill fate, the conception of the newborn brother will have to be accomplished by her (sacred) rape. This backstory makes good sense of Section 3’s first Question, according to which compensation for a dead youth is accomplished “by a woman’s sacrifice”. The inscription does not name Rindr, but a farm not far from Rök bore a name in the Middle Ages, which onomastic scholars interpret as

‘Rindr’s shrine’. This is widely taken as an independent witness to knowledge of the giantess/goddess Rindr and of her worship in Östergötland. Since the only actions involving Rindr known to surviving tradition consist of the story of her rape, motherhood, and on-going relation to the god Óðinn, the ancient place name is also a witness to knowledge of the myth in the area of Rök.

In the west the **bereaved father** is Óðinn. He is not named on Rök but referred to (as if in a noa-name) by a respectful periphrasis, “shrine-respecting Kinsman” (27). But old age is characteristic of Óðinn practically everywhere in the mythology.

In the west the **newborn brother** is named *Váli* or (in Saxo) *Bous* (i.e., Danish *Bo-* + Latin *-us*); on Rök he is named *Þórr* (26). Þórr is of course not elsewhere known in this role, but he is a son of Óðinn by a figure closely associated with Rindr in the mythology (namely Jörðr); and a few other features of his dossier are compatible with this variation.

The Baldr-surrogate, **the slain youth**, in Rök’s provincial myth is named *Vilinn*, a name or nickname that undoubtedly takes us into the Óðinnic sphere (cf. the three brothers Óðinn, Vili, and Vé) and by its root meaning and structure suits a beloved young god, whose more usual name is, after all, in origin quite possibly a title (cf. Freyr). Baldr was of course the darling of the gods; etymologically *Vilinn* might mean something like ‘lord of joy’, and in real life names were commonly compounded with *vil-*, even including ON *Vilbaldr*, OE *Wilbeald*, *Willibaldus*, etc.

We take up a discussion of the fifth actor, **the slayer**, further on.

The western Baldr myths contrast in two main (and linked) features with the *minni*, or narrative hints, in Rök’s Section 3, first in the matter of **compensation** for the killing of the young god. In Snorri’s elaborate version, the events that immediately follow Baldr’s death are an attempt to thwart death (Hermóðr’s ride; the effort to weep Baldr out of Hel); only when they fail, does the narrative spotlight fall on revenge. In Snorri of course there are two slayers, Loki the intellectual author of the crime (*ráðbani*) and Höðr the blind brother and hand-slayer (*handbani*). Though Snorri’s account follows only the revenge on Loki, he must have known of (and suppressed) the revenge on Höðr (as a remark in ch. 28 [quoted below] and references in his verse sources make clear). The older strand is obviously Óðinn’s engendering of Váli to take revenge on his half brother, as attested in the Icelandic verse sources, and this thread is followed exclusively in Saxo, where no Loki-figure is mentioned in connection with the slaying of Balderus. Saxo’s avenging newborn Bous is a character from Danish myth or folklore, seemingly as extraneous to the myth as we know it from Snorri as Þórr in the Rök version; Bous fulfills his role and immediately dies. Similarly, nothing more is told of Váli than that he took revenge for Baldr (*Baldrs draumar* 11 [name missing]; *Hyndluljóð* 29; *Vølusþá* 32-33 [name missing]), except that he will return after Ragnarøk with the younger gods. (The baffling fact that Loki also has a son named Váli, who is also a fratricide, remains unexplained.)

Generally, then, the familiar western sources, the *Poetic Edda*, Snorri, and Saxo, offer three (or perhaps four) different versions of the myth with varying plots and names. The Icelandic versions agree that a (half) brother of Baldr is born, one dedicated from

birth to revenge and supporting no further narrative; this is the story also in Saxo except for the absence of brotherhood. In *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, the newborn is an infant avenger, and Bous seems to have been a baby figure in the background folklore (but a fertility bringer, not an avenger). *Hyndluljóð* seems generally to belong with the verse tradition, but it does not give the age of Baldr's avenger. In addition, by mentioning that the revenge falls on the *handbani*, *Hyndluljóð* may imply a background knowledge of a *ráðbani* and therefore knowledge of the Loki version. The great student of Baldr, Gustav Neckel, speculated that Bous was originally a rebirth of Baldr; de Vries (summarized below) also sees Váli as a reborn Baldr, but chiefly in the context of an initiation ritual. In general, scholarship has produced little or no speculation on non-revenge versions of the compensation for Baldr, and the proverb from *Sonatorrek* has certainly never been applied to this archetypal revenge tale. Rebirth would of course not logically preclude revenge. In any case the East Nordic versions of the death of the beloved young god seem, despite the same narrative structure, not to focus exclusively on revenge.

Exhibit One for this claim is, of course, the Rök story itself, where compensation (*vari guldinn* “was compensated for”; 21-22) is regeneration within the family, the engendering and birth of a new *niðr* in place of the lost one, rather than coming in the form either of wergild or of revenge. This interpretation is supported by *Sonatorrek*, st. 17 (on the handout), which speaks of an old proverb to the effect that there is no compensation for a dead son *unless* the father himself engender a new heir “in place of” the dead.

Exhibit Two: The Baldr myth is reflected in a second Gautish, probably West Gautish, story, the Herebeald and Hæðcyn episode in Geatish (Gautish) history as told in *Beowulf*. Here *Hæð-cyn* (whose name reflects the same root as that of *Hƿǫðr*) accidentally (or ‘accidentally’) kills his brother *Here-beald* (cf. *Baldr*). Their father King Hreðel, occupying the structural slot of Óðinn, grieves like Óðinn but cannot take revenge or, obviously, get monetary compensation for a slaying within the family; no new son is engendered, either for revenge on his brother or as a replacement, though the *Beowulf* poet does arrange to have the brother-bane soon slain in battle. Hreðel's grief leads swiftly to his death.

Exhibit Three: Within this famous episode the *Beowulf* poet has positioned a long, almost Homeric simile in which an unnamed old karl loses his son in similarly unavengeable circumstances; we do not learn whether he too dies of grief, but our last glimpse of him is taking to his bed to sing a lament.

The Beowulfian narrative, then – reinforced by the more distant simile – is a further Gautish analogue of the Baldr myth. And while revenge is here a topic (in both stories in *Beowulf*) or a potential turn of narrative (Rök), these East Scandinavian versions do not end like the western myth in realized revenge. As for the East Gautish version about the death of Vilinn, we cannot be sure that some tellings might not have pressed the revenge button (a possibility discussed further on); but the version preferred by Varinn and inscribed on the Rök stone on the occasion of the death of Vámóðr was more interested in the ancient form of compensation in *Sonatorrek*'s proverb, which is also alluded to in the Beowulfian simile, namely regeneration of the family through replacement or rebirth of the slain lad.

The second major contrast between Rök's myth and the western versions lies in the agent of the death of the young god, and here we take up the fifth actor, **the slayer**. In Saxo, Høtherus's enmity to Balderus is systematic and overdetermined: unrelated to Balderus, the human Høtherus apparently simply hates the gods; in addition, the two are competing for the woman Nanna (in Snorri the name of Baldr's wife) but also for the crown of Denmark – a typical Saxonian mishmash of a narrative. (Cf. Davidson's introduction to Book III, pp. 65-66.) In the Icelandic verse tradition (*Baldrs draumar* 9, *Völuspá* 32) Hǫðr is Óðinn's son, Baldr's brother, and alone responsible for Baldr's death (unless we press the passage *Hyndluljóð* 29 exceptionally hard, as hinted above), but he stands rather in the background of the story. In Snorri he is blind, and the whole famous tale of the game of shooting at Baldr and of Loki's manipulations follows from that trait. Who is the slayer in the Gautish tradition? In Rök the relationship of the killer to the victim is not specified, and we will return to the description of him as a **iatun**. In *Beowulf* of course one brother "missed his mark and shot his brother" (*miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscēt*; l. 2439); Hæðcyn is not blind and not the cat's paw of some Loki figure, so he resembles more his namesake in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. On the other hand, the scene implicit in Herebeald's death does seem to have the characteristics of a game, perhaps an archery contest. Neckel's study of Baldr emphasizes the fratricidal aspect, and other Swedish stories of tragic brother slayings support Neckel's mainly Mediterranean parallels (*Ynglingasaga*). Most students of the Baldr myth have considered Loki to be an interloper in the tradition; and von Friesen, whose early study of Rök also identifies allusions to the Baldr myth there, thought that Loki entered the Baldr complex as late as the eleventh century. Von Friesen's view of Hǫðr distanced the killer from the family romance (following Saxo). It would be foolish to attempt here a full-fledged reconstruction of the 'original' narrative in view of the many, many studies of the Baldr myth I have not read, but it should be obvious that Snorri, Icelandic verse, and *Beowulf* support the killer's family relationship to the victim while Rök is compatible with that analysis and Saxo's deviance can be explained in many ways, perhaps beginning with his historicization of the story.

Excursus: The overall meaning of the Rök inscription [summarizing Harris 2006: 97-103]

The three sections of Rök agree on a thematics of death-and-life. I have argued that the relationship of the treatment of theme in those three sections can be seen as a classic Lévi-Straussian exercise in reasoning with stories, but a reader does not have to accept the binary opposition with mediation in order to recognize the theme and its three different treatments. Section 1 of Rök deals with a great individual hero, Theodoric the Ostrogoth (454-526), and the mystery of his continuing life despite death: "Who became without life (died) among the Hreið-Goths nine ages ago, and yet his affairs are still under discussion?" Section 2 is less well understood, but we hear there of twenty viking-kings, who had ruled in Zealand, dead on a battlefield there; a name-list (or thula) shows that they shared four names and communal 'fathers'. The form of life-after-death portrayed is thus corporate, the immortality of the *Männerbund*, I argued. Section 3's story has the death of a Baldr-like figure and the birth of a new brother in his place; the replacement brother is sired by the aged Óðinn through a sacred rape. Life is thus renewed after death within the blood line, the family, but the Lévi-Straussian problem that is mediated involves the opposition

of individual and community, mediated by the recyclable individual within the traditional community.

III. This brings us to a consideration of the description of the killer on Rök as a **iatun**, a challenge to our hypothesis about the myth encoded there – its secrecy protected by cipher and a cryptic arrangement of text – but also an opportunity perhaps to look more deeply into the myth and into Old Norse myth generally. This word **iatun** can only be an early form of the later OWN *jötunn*, ModIce *jötunn*, which of course normally means “giant.” It poses the question how (a) *jötunn* can be integrated into the Baldr myth in its versions.

(1) It is possible, perhaps just barely possible, that *Jötunn* is simply the name or, more probably, the nickname of the killer. E. H. Lind lists a *Jötunoxi*, brother of Night, as a fictional name from a mythic-heroic saga [Supplementbd. 540] and a semi-historical *Iotunbiorn*, a nickname which, like many others, became a regular name in the next generation (*Personbinamn* 182)[main volume, 1915, on recall]. Hellquist recognizes that Old Swedish had this word as a name or nickname, citing the example of a *Iætunbol*, now *Jätsbol*, in Södermanland (p. 428). If *Jötunn* is a name or nickname, the favored fratricidal model would be untouched in Rök’s variant of the myth.

(2) It seems more likely that *jötunn* is used in this early text as a hostile epithet, as if in modern English we were to call someone a “monster.” This usage would make most sense of a fraternal slayer, where perhaps it is painful, from the father’s point of view, to utter the real name of his son’s killer. (Snorri happens to mention this motivation in *Gylfaginning*, ch. 28: *Höðr heitir einn Ásinn. ... En vilja mundu goðin at þenna Ás þyrfti eigi at nefna, þvíat hans handaverk munu lengi vera höfð at minnum með goðum ok mǫnnum* ‘There is one god (Áss) called Höðr ... But the gods would wish that it was not necessary to name this god because his handiwork will [long] be kept in the memory of gods and men.’) We may see a parallel to this (imagined) situation in *Beowulf*’s Baldr-analogue, where the deed, though apparently accidental (“missed his mark”) is nevertheless a *feohlēas gefeoht* “a fight/feud that could not be compounded by wergild” and *fyrenum gesyngad* “wickedly and sinfully committed” (2441b); Hæðcyn is flatly called his own brother’s “life’s bane” (*feorhbana*) and no longer dear to his father (*þeah him leof ne wæs*, 2467b); the deed was a “hostile act” (*fæghðe*, 2465b; so Klaeber). Hæðcyn’s name is not used again after 2437 while the narrator adopts a paternal viewpoint (roughly 2440-71) and is only named again when the narrator has resumed a more objective view as Hæðcyn is slain in battle (2482b). In the stretch of text that shows the paternal narrative shading, Hæðcyn is once referred to as *þone heaðorinc*; this is of course simply a periphrasis, avoiding the name and calling him “that warrior” but utilizing a noun that embodies the same first element as we find in Hæðcyn’s real name. *Heaðorinc* is indeed an epithet substituting for the name of a brother killer in a context of strong paternal disapproval, but in itself *heaðorinc* does not carry the negative connotations of “monster” or *jötunn*. *Beowulf* does, however, offer other passages where *eoten*, the OE cognate of *jötunn*, may well be a negative epithet for “enemy.” [Much material to support this is in K. Schulz, *Riesen* (2004), to be extracted.][Karsten, *Fragen*, p. 30: “jötul, jutul, die, ganz wie die in Frage stehenden finnischen, als Schimpfwörter für Menschen angewandt werden”.]

The passages are well known, the Finnsburg Episode and the death of Heremod. (In the present argument I reference mainly the conclusions of the recent article by Stehmuller and the older one by Kaske, also the comprehensive notes to the recent revision of Klaeber's edition. On another occasion I want to analyze more closely the Beowulfian passages.) In these two passages reference is made to *eotenum* and *eotena* (dat. pl., gen. pl.), ambiguous grammatical forms, which can be understood as belonging to *eotenas* (ON *jötunar*) or to *Eotan* (Lat. *Iuti*). (Technically the gen. pl. is the only ambiguous form in the paradigm; full explanation in Campbell pp. 245-46. Campbell does not say that the forms became fully weak.) The latter is the n-stem revision of the originally i-stem folk name of the Jutes (**Eote*, **Iote*, **Yte*) while the former represents our *iatun*. *Beowulf* scholars have long argued inconclusively for either Jutes or giants in the two passages, and I have some opinions about the specific passages. On this occasion, however, I wish simply to adopt one of the earliest explanations, that of Leo (1839), in a brilliant modern form by R.E. Kaske, according to which "giant" is here to be taken in a metaphorical sense approximating "enemy." Kaske demonstrates from skaldic sources that *jötunar* could be "an insulting figurative epithet for 'enemies'" (esp. pp. 289-90) and finds some more popular parallels (294). To Kaske's passages I will (in another context) add a few usages of *jötunn* in appropriate senses; however, this is not one of the canonical skaldic tropes but only an informal and ad hoc usage that could arise anywhere. Kaske works carefully through the ten Beowulfian instances of *eoten* and argues persuasively that the "enemy" connotation of "giant" fits the five problematic instances. I am less persuaded by his secondary arguments that the insult was traditionally applied especially to Frisians and by his biblical echoes and accompanying deeper reading. The only caveat against his main argument concerning the "hostile epithet" is our faith, inherited from Heusler, that Germanic heroic poetry did not take sides, that its 'epic' narrative reported events objectively. Passages like the narrator's condemnation of Hæðcyn, discussed above, suggest that this faith needs to be reexamined.

(3) The possibility must remain a strong one, in the context of Old Norse myth and of the message of this part of *Rök*, that the *iatun* is a real "giant", a creature that appears widely in later Norse verse and prose and constitutes an important segment of the very structure of Norse mythology. To judge by the older verse attestations, the main characteristic of the *jötunn* is not so much size as hostility [Schulz], and the term is applied to a wide variety of monstrous creatures; but if the opposition between gods and giants is structural in Old Norse mythology, so is their integration. Loki, who is blood-brother to Odin and lives among the gods, is of giant ancestry, and of course the male gods happily practice exogamy with giantesses, while male giants would gladly reciprocate by abducting goddesses if they could. In fact, if Rindr was originally a giantess (so Faulkes, index; Snorri says that she and Jörðr are "enrolled" among the goddesses, as if added in a courtesy appointment), then Baldr's precocious avenger Váli was a half-giant; and Thor's giant mistress Járnsaxa gave birth to a similarly precocious strong-baby, Magni. For that matter Thor's mother in the standard mythology is the giantess Jörðr ('earth'; however, she is also classified as a goddess, and the primary sources are contradictory). Another coupling on this pattern (Odin with Gríðr) yields another avenging god (he avenges Odin at Ragnrök) of the younger generation, Víðarr, who is frequently paired with Váli. The (former) giantesses Rindr and Jörðr remain *Nebenfrauen* of Odin even after their narrative moment as his mistress, and the mythology seems to treat them, like Skaði, as

converted to goddess status. (See Steinsland generally on the role of giantess-exogamy in myth and genealogy.) If *iatun* on Rök designates a “giant” like those in the standard western mythological sources, then it will be difficult to separate him from Loki, who of course is in Snorri one of the slayers of Baldr. Von Friesen’s solution (though his reconstruction of the myths attested on Rök is quite different) was to suppose that Hǫðr was originally a giant, hence his hostility to the gods in Saxo and his outsider status in Snorri. The *iatun* in Rök might then simply be an epithet for Hǫðr and, we might add, the root of the later western version with Loki. It is less easy to imagine how the hostile *jötunn* Hǫðr could have become the brother of Baldr (and of Vilinn if we see the fratricidal model behind Rök). We still need the fraternal model, and we would have to imagine the convergence of two related story patterns, independent realizations of the same myth.

Of these three explanations – in short hand, (1) name/nickname; (2) hostile epithet in a fratricidal model; (3) real giant – the first and second are scarcely mutually exclusive, and I find that explanation the most satisfying. A real giant raises more problems in explaining the relation of the Rök myth to the western versions and especially to *Beowulf*, and I am still very taken with Neckel’s great construction (which I have not tried to summarize here) based on fratricide. Two features of Rök must be cited in favor of the third explanation of *iatun*, however. First, the newborn brother, replacement of Vilinn/Baldr, is here named Þórr, and Þórr’s enmity to giants is one of his most obvious characteristics throughout the mythology. Even though Varinn’s version of the Baldr myth (like the proverb cited in *Sonatorrek* 17) imagines compensation through replacement (or rebirth) within the family, it is undeniable that the coincidence of “Þórr” and “jötunn” in the same story raises expectations of violence. And, as I theorized above, other versions with the same *dramatis personae* might have led straight to the *jötunn*’s death. The second feature favoring a real giant is the manner in which *iatun* killed Vilinn in my reconstruction: the verb *knuá*, which is a hapax legomenon like so many words in Rök, has been related to the words for knuckles and might imply a more primitive mode of killing than any of the other versions. Some of the heroic/historical fratricidal tales of *Ynglingasaga* have similar, more physical killings, but the status of these stories in relation to the myth is not clear. All the other established texts of the myth proper allude to a missile or in Saxo to a sword thrust during a mysterious (or poorly told) night-time encounter on a path. The “real giant” plot is however rather thin and unsatisfying. One wants to ask, who was this giant and why did he want to kill ‘the lord of joy’?

IV. A great many theories of the Baldr myth have been propounded, and many of them are ably surveyed in the latest book I am aware of on this theme, John Lindow’s *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (1997). Obviously I am not in a position to offer any kind of *Forschungsbericht* beyond Lindow’s book and the interpretive study that I regard as the single richest for my purposes, Jan de Vries’s 1955 article “Der Mythos von Baldrs Tod” (and in his great *Altnordische Religionsgeschichte*). Lindow’s work commands agreement as far as it goes. He writes about the mythic material around Baldr chiefly as it exists in thirteenth and fourteenth century Icelandic sources, asking what writers like Snorri saw in it. Not surprisingly, the answers chiefly relate to medieval society, especially to the feud as an institution. It would be difficult to assert that this “contemporary” medieval view – medieval reception, in short – is not a reasonable mode of

interpretation, but does it not demythologize myth? Perhaps to Snorri and the thirteenth century these were pretty or horrific tales of the ancients that could have a contemporary application (what kind of a car would Jesus drive?), but I want something darker, probably not reasonable and not logical for my myth (the Trinity; drinking the blood and eating the flesh of my god). In any case, Rök's version of the Baldr myth is about two centuries earlier than any other and geographically marginal with respect to the later attestations. If I ask what is the Baldr story about as very early myth, de Vries's article seems the place to start. Lindow also expresses admiration of de Vries's ideas ("doubtless the most lasting contribution to recent Baldr research" [Lindow, 30]), but of course he also criticizes (33-36). I agree with those parts of Lindow's criticism that focus especially on de Vries's ritual of initiation; but while this is indeed foregrounded in de Vries's theory, his background reading of the myth is not dependent on it. In the following I draw on de Vries without citing his support at every turn.

Baldr's death is, then, the First Death in this mythology, and as a whole his myth treats the problem of death. True, the primordial being Ymir was butchered to furnish body parts for the creation of the universe at the very beginning of the cosmic order, but Baldr's drama stages the first tragedy of mortality relevant to humans. Baldr's position as beloved member of a family and as a human-like god (demi-god in Saxo) separate him from Ymir and his death from any death-like phenomenon not grounded in a 'society,' the primeval society of the family, in mythological time before him. As source of the construction blocks of the universe, Ymir belongs to nature; Baldr belonged to culture. Odin's grief is the paradigm of paternal grief; Baldr's funeral is paradigmatic for human funerals, at least among the elite cults. It seems that grief was discovered on this occasion and perhaps the funeral elegy, the *erfíkvæði*, invented. The effort to bring Baldr back from the realm of death (Hermóðr's ride and the attempt to weep Baldr out of Hel) is almost successful, but not quite, and de Vries is right in comparing this motif across cultures to origin-of-death motifs. This motif might have carried various meanings in various times and places, but Lindow is probably right in associating the 'near-miss' at preventing death with death's inevitability in the world as we know it (32). Other commentators do not note a paradigmatic quality also in Baldr's *manner* of death, but to me death in a game and at the hands of a relative seems quintessential; and Hreðel's reaction in *Beowulf*, and the Old Man's in the simile there, seem to me the quintessential reaction to death within the family. Rök and the ancient proverb provide a natural form of compensation – if only one could believe in it – and in general the myth can surely be said to concern the consequences of death, including the social consequences such as revenge. Lindow emphasizes this last element of the 'mythologem,' supplementing de Vries's breakdown; and indeed revenge may well have been the element that found the greatest resonance in the later reception of the myth in the age of its preservation in Snorri. I have argued that at an earlier period the Baldr paradigm was intimately tied to grief and its expression in the *erfíkvæði* along the lines of Eliade's famous exposition of reciprocal imitations between god and man. In Rök's inscription, and to an extent in the Baldr-influenced *Sonatorrek* and the Old Man's Lament in *Beowulf*, compensation for death other than revenge is weighed, and at an early period, I hypothesize, the story of this First Death concerned the nature of death itself.

Baldr does not return from death in the manner of a vegetation god. He returns only at the end of the present cosmic cycle, along with the other younger Æsir; they do not return like spring to the same world they left but instead will begin a new aeon. True, some features of the older culture (perhaps symbolized by the chess men found in the grass) will exist in their memory, but the new world is not something the seeress of *Völuspá* can extensively preview or even conceive. The important thing about Baldr is precisely that he dies, that he is a dead god. Baldr's death is foreshadowed by dreams; in his story, death is first of all the *fated* end of the beloved hero, and insofar as the god is a paradigm for man, it teaches that man cannot evade the fact of his own fated end. Death comes to Baldr too soon, but that too seems paradigmatic for the experience of men in the world. In the very first line of the Rök inscription, Vámóðr is described by the epithet "fated to die"; commentators have had some difficulty in justifying this epithet for a youth who is already dead. The point, I believe, is to associate Vámóðr with Baldr/Vilinn very much in the way Eliade's famous theory would have predicted. After all, we are all fated to die (*feigr*) and, with few exceptions, to die 'too young' by our own lights. What death actually *does* in the myth is not conceived in anatomical terms (as we might describe death); instead it is a social fact: it removes Baldr from his family and the clan of the gods, breaching the circle of kin (so *Sonatorrek*). The famous funeral ritualizes this breach and causes the remains of Baldr to disappear, but Baldr himself continues to exist in the underworld home of Hel. Norse mythology of various periods knows various things about the land of Hel, but essentially it is the "covered," hidden, invisible, in the etymology of Hel's name; since it "lies downward and northward", it may have been based on the communal passage graves of the late Stone Age, which opened to the south (de Vries, Simek). It is generally agreed of Hel that the covered realm came first and the "goddess", as she is called in Snorri, followed as a personification; in any case, an individualized frightening person Hel is firmly present already in *Sonatorrek* of 961.

In *Kalyso*, his stunningly original book of 1919, Hermann Güntert argued that Hel the individual preceded Hel the dismal hidden land of the dead, rather than the other way around (35-40), or at the very least is a co-development from the fear of the communal grave (43). Güntert's etymological exploration of the expressions of the PIE roots for the ideas "hide, cover, enwrap," especially the derivatives of PIE **kol-/kel-*, puts many aspects of Germanic death mythology into illuminating cross-cultural perspectives. To Güntert, Hel is "eine uralte, gemeingermanische Dämonin – eine Dämonin ... nicht eine persönlich gestaltete Göttin!" (39). Her name and function are pre-Indo-European in the sense that they are shared with Finno-Ugric: "nach ihm [Setälä] gab es eine allen finnisch-ugrischen Völkern gemeinsame, chthonische Gottheit *Koljo*, deren Name sich ergibt aus finn. *Koljo* 'Riese, riesenhaftes Geschöpf' ... [examples]... Ich denke diese Belege genügen, um zu beweisen, daß diese finnisch-ugrische chthonische Todesgottheit *Koljo* identisch ist mit unsere nord. *Hel* < urgerm. **Halja*, indg. **Koljo* ... (52-53)" In Snorri, Hel is a giantess, daughter of Loki and one of the three great monsters of Norse mythology – the cosmic wolf Fenrir, the world-encircling serpent Jörmungandr, and the gastly half-black mistress of the dead, Hel. But her treatment there is much more diplomatic than that of her monstrous siblings; she is for example barely mentioned in connection with Ragnarök where her brothers have their great moment of destruction ("[B]ut with Loki will be all Hel's people" ch. 51; Faulkes p. 54). Surely Güntert is right in seeing Hel as originally a corpse-devouring demon rather than the stately figure Snorri shows, and

in general the development Norse religion – for example in the concept of Valhöll – from a real terror of death in more primitive stages toward medieval bowdlerization is clear. Hel is etymologically a demon who “covers, hides, conceals” the corpses of the dead, but Güntert frequent refers to her with a different vocabulary:

“menschenverschlingende Leichendämonin, wie ich sie für gemeingermanisch und vorgermanisch halte” (40); “in den Höhlen und Grüften, in welche die Toten gesenkt werden, haust die gierige, alle Menschenleiber verschlingende Leichendämonin...” (39). This language implicitly identifies the “concealing” demon with one that actively (“gierig”) consumes its victims; and while a few images of Hel in ON seem to support this (cf. Hel as a carrion-eating raven in a verse by Egill, Güntert, p. 42), Güntert seems really to have in mind the wolf and hound which are associated with death: “Mit diesem *Garmr* aber haben wir einen Beleg für die uralte Vorstellung vom Leichenfresser genannt, vom tierisch, gierig schlingenden Todesdämon, wie er gemeinsam dem ‘vieräugigen Hund’ der alten Inder, den beiden Höllenhunden des Awesta, die die Brücke *Činvat*- bewachen und dem *Kerberos* der Griechen zugrunde liegt” (41). Güntert goes on to make a kind of “Proportion” out of the relationship of the goddess and the hell-hound such that “Gottesgestalten und Dämonen, die auf Grund ähnlicher Vorstellungen entstanden waren, erscheinen in der Sprache des Mythos als leibliche Verwandte ...:

Hel : Fenrisulfr, Garmr = Hekate, Hekabe : Kerberos” (41).

The etymologies of *Fenrisulfr* and *Garmr* offer no connection with the sphere of death, despite their role in the mythology. (*Fenrir* has no satisfactory etymology; the connection with *fen* “swamp, water” suggests only a wilderness monster, but one related ethnic name does insure great age to the word. *Garmr* is derived from a root associated with noise, in this case his barking.) But *jötunn* does have a firm etymology of interest; de Vries reconstructs PGmc **etuna-* from the root of *eta* “to eat” and expands: “Wohl ein riesenname ‘der gewaltige fresser’, oder sogar ‘leichenverslingender dämon’” (295-6). If Finn *etona*, *etana* “schnecke, würmchen; schlechter mensch” is a Gmc borrowing, we have the old form frozen in time and in the worm a reflection of original devouring death. The later forms in Da and Sw like *jätte*, *jätte* have hypocoristic gemination (Hellqvist). (From Gmc various Finno-Ugric languages have borrowed words derived from this root several times, and the dictionaries cite also a [presumably early] Finn. *etolainen* “repulsive” from PrNordic **etula-*, **etola-*, firmly attested in NNorw *jøtul* “giant,” as well as later Finn. borrowings from an OSw **iatul* in Finn. *iatuli* “giant” (Hellqvist). Thomsen lists also NorwSaami *jetanas* and SwSaami *jættenes* “giant”, Finn. *jätti*, dial. *Jatuli*. Collinder, however, makes a good case for all the forms without breaking, i.e., showing *et/ed-*, as native. Karsten had argued that they must be from Gmc before the first sound shift [Karsten, Fragen].) Old English *eoten* has the variant *eten*, and in Middle and Early Modern English *et(t)in* is still common. OE also has a well-attested *ent* “giant” where the usage approximates to *gigas* closely, especially as to size; I have not been able to find a satisfactory etymology of *ent* or to locate the MHG *enz* “giant” referred to by Holthausen. Falk and Torp take **etuna-* to **etan* and gloss it “also ‘vielfresser’ (oder ‘menschenfresser’)” (s.v. *Jätte*); A. Jóhannesson extensively parallels his etymological gloss to *valkyrja*: “Die walküren hatten urspr. vogelgestalt (vgl. Neckel, Walhall 79), und ags. *wælcéasiga* ‘rabe’ deutet auf die urspr. bed. von *kjósa* hin: ‘schmecken, geniessen’. Demnach ist *valkyrja* urspr. ein vampyr oder bluttrinkender

dämon, eine personification der aasvögel der walstatt, ebenso wie *jōtunn* ein leichenfressender dämon, eine personification der vermoderung ist ...” (322).

De Vries expresses some doubt about the derivation from **etuna-* on two counts. First, is a u-stem **edu-* likely? This seems to echo Pokorny, who integrates *jōtunn*, *eoten* into the large word-family with a question whether “ein alter u-St. edu-” may be assumed from Lat *edulus* “Esser” and Lat *edulis* “eßbar” (289); Pokorny’s display of derivatives (287-89) includes many verbal forms and nominal stems, but most nouns are built on the extended grade roots. Our word seems to be the only agent noun build on the normal grade among this group of derivatives in Pokorny, but my linguistic consultants raise no serious objection. De Vries’s second doubt (296) concerns (1) the suffix **-una-* (as in Lat *tribūnus*) instead of the more common **-ana-* and **-ina-* and (2) the fact that words with this suffix are usually derived from collectives. To judge by Meid’s extensive study of “Das Suffix –no- in Götternamen,” the **-una-* suffix, though common in Latin, may be rare in Germanic, but the material is not examined for this question. However, Meid’s paragraphs on the base word seem to demonstrate that while appellatives showing leadership (*dróttinn* to *drótt*, *pēoden* to *pēod*) are based on a collective, divine names are not (*Óðinn* not to the *Wilder Heer* but to *óðr*, with original u-stem changed to a-stem; *Ullinn* to **wulpus*, etc.) (De Vries, whose dictionary came out in 1962, perhaps too late to be influenced by Meid’s 1957 article, may still be expressing judgments from derived from his publications of 1931 and 1934.) The base word of *jōtunn* would seem to qualify well: if it meant here not “food” but food as a collective (as in OE *æ̆s*, OHG, OSax *ās* “carrion, the collective dead bodies” from the extended grade of the same root), then using Meid’s semantics the **-uno-* derivative would originally have meant “the one who is equipped with carrion for eating.”

Hellquist favors a simple ‘storätare’ ‘big eater’ (cf. Lat *edax*): “enl. somliga dock, sannol. felaktigt, med syftning på ursprungliga likdemoner: likätare” (428). But it seems unlikely that such an early mythological term would have taken its name merely from gluttony or the appetite of giants as encountered in the comical forms of folktales; in fact appetite is not one of the particular characteristics of “giants” in the older Icelandic sources (Schulz). If “big eater” was the original meaning of the form, the religious-mythological context would in any case have lent a pregnant significance. It’s negative evidence, of course, but Gothic seems to have invented a word for the concept glutton, *af-etja* (Lehmann A15), perhaps avoiding a demonic word. If Karsten is right and **etuna-* was borrowed by Finno-Ugric peoples east of the Baltic in the pre-Gmc form **eduno-*, the time might have been about the middle of the first millennium BC (Karsten 35 quoting Much). That is of course fairly speculative and learnedly disputed, but in any case this word must have a long history.

The rarity of the construction with **-una-*, when *Óðinn* and *Ullinn* use **-ana-* even though they are built on u-stem base words (Meid), could be an argument for antiquity especially if the observations of Janda are borne out: “Das ved. Suffix *-una-*, mit dem Varuṇa scheinbar gebildet ist, findet sich nur selten in Erbwörtern. Jedenfalls einmal in der Indogermania, im Fall der germanischen Riesenbezeichnung aisl. *jōtunn*, ae. *eoten*, die aus uridg. **h₁eduno-* ‘Fresser’ hergeleitet wird, steht eine Bildung mit **-uno-* neben einem uridg. Heteroklitikon **h₁éd-ur* ‘Essen’ (gr. eidar)” (*Eleusis* 110-

11). Janda sets up this parallel with the derivation of Varuṇa's name: "Der Ableitungsprozeß war somit:

**uél-ur* 'Einschließung, Umhüllung' →

**uelun-ó* 'mit einer Einschließung, Umhüllung versehen'

Das Adjektiv **uelun-ó* mußte im Ai. **varuṇá*- ergeben. Wie bei *kṛṣṇá*- 'schwarz' → *Kṛṣṇa*-, bekannter Personen- und Gottesname, brachte die Substantivierung **varuṇá*- → *Váruṇa*- 'der (Gott) mit der Umhüllung' eine Akzentverschiebung auf die erste Silbe mit sich" (111). It would appear, then, that the old Gmc word **etuna*-, probably originally designating a demon who consumes (the dead), is constructed according to a (in Gmc at least) rare pattern paralleled by one of the most original Indic gods and one who happens to share a semantic range with the Gmc Hel.

Mythologies of the greater world offer many images of gaping Hell-mouths, cannibalistic death-embodying monsters, many demons that, like the early *jötnar* in ON, border on divine, but in the end I have limited comparison here to directly related material. We have not solved the problem of **iatun** in the Rök stone's version of the Baldr myth. It is clear, however, that whether **iatun** was metaphorical – an unflattering nickname or a hostile epithet used to avoid the real name of the slayer – or literal – a hostile supernatural being designated by his species – we should clear our minds of the later images evoked by "giant." This **iatun** is the earliest occurrence of the word and of the race in Scandinavia; the being evoked should be at least as monstrous as the contemporary *eoten* Grendel, but as part of the central myth in the ON mythic system, the Rök **iatun** may have carried even more archaic religious significance.