

**Brother Gods of Light and Darkness:  
Origins of the Baldr Myth  
by Timothy J. Stephany**  
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**Abstract:**

Baldr is a god of light and his adversary Hod is associated with darkness. Their story of fratricide is present in four forms in Northern Europe; however in only the Eddas is Loki made responsible for the deed, so his presence must be a late addition. The gods' names are common throughout Europe and western Asia and down in the Middle East. The evidence points to an agricultural myth that arose during the Neolithic in Syria then moved into Europe as the knowledge of agriculture spread northward. Balder corresponds to the Syrian sky god Bel and Baldr's wife Nanna is equivalent to the Syrian goddess Inanna, who's descent into the underworld is similar to that of Baldr and also Idunn. Condensing it into a simple naturalistic explanation: the two brothers of Summer (Baldr) and Winter (Hod) fought over the Earth (Nanna) and Winter was always vanquished upon Summer's return. The Norse myth of Baldr's death may be a combination of two independent stories attested in *Beowulf*.

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## Introduction

As presented in the Eddas, the god Baldr is a god of light and his adversary Hod (warrior) is associated with darkness. Their story is present in four forms in Northern Europe: that of the Eddas, that of *Beowulf*, that of Saxo and that of *Hromundar-saga Greipssonar*. Each is quite different but shares the same basic features. The gods Baldr and Hod are sons of Odin and in *Beowulf* Herebeald and Haethcyn in are brothers. The basic story is one of fratricide but not necessarily intentional. It says in “Gylfaginning”: “Hod is the name of one As. He is blind. Only too strong is he. And the gods would prefer that this As did not need to be named; for the work of his hands will long be kept in mind among gods and men.” (Sturluson 1987: 26) In only the Eddas is Loki made responsible for the deed, but even so it is still Hod who is put to death. As the other three versions in Saxo’s history, *Beowulf*, and *Hromundar-saga Greipssonar* do not mention Loki, he can be considered a later addition.<sup>1</sup> Then there is Nanna, alternately Baldr’s wife in the Eddas or Hod’s wife in Saxo, who provokes the contest between them.

The association of Baldr with mistletoe, of which the dart that brought him down was made, must go to a deeper association not captured in the story.<sup>2</sup> Snorri mentions the sword Mistletoe, and Misteltein (mistletoe sword) comes from *Hromundar-saga Greipssonar*. In this saga Hromund took the sword out of a hill from a berserker’s ghost. Hromund (Hod) loved Svanhit, but the magicians Bildr (Baldr) and Voli (Vali) opposed his marriage to her. In the contest Bildr is killed, and Voli, after knocking Misteltein out of Hromund’s hand and delivering a wound, is

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<sup>1</sup> Thus the binding of Loki was caused by a different circumstance that is not suggested anywhere, except that it might relate in some way to Skadi, known for binding the snake above his head.

<sup>2</sup> Since mistletoe is a plant that grows and thrives even during the winter season it would have been viewed as a sign of the redemption of life and the promise of spring.

himself killed. (McCulloch 1964: 136) In the Saxo version, Hother sets out to kill Balder with a sword (Grammaticus 1979: vol. I, 75).

These gods too might be attested by Tacitus, who says that Castor and Pollux were worshipped as the Alcis, which could mean elk (*alsces*) (Simek 1993: 7). Another definition for *alcis* is ‘gods’, which could merely attest that the gods and elks were deeply wound together. The only other immediate reference comes from Saxo, who says that Hother rode a chariot pulled by reindeer (Grammaticus 1979: vol. I, 70).

### **Gods of Light and Darkness**

The relation of Baldr to mistletoe reinforces the relationship of the seasonal cycle with the god of summer. The general conception of light is more accurate than either sun or summer. However as gods of light and darkness, Baldr and Hod would also be associated with both the daily sun cycle and the annual solar cycle.

It was said that the summer clothed the earth, but that the winter stripped her bare (Grimm 2004: 761). Frost and snow were seen as giants of winter who were fought back by the summer, which can be compared to the fight between Apollo and the dragon. Although Venus reconciles the brothers, in the end winter is slain by summer (Grimm 2004: 1531).

The gods’ names are common enough throughout Europe and western Asia and down in the Middle East (although each of these may not necessarily correspond to Baldr and Hod). There are the Irish Beal or Beil, the Gaelic Beal, and the Welsh Beli<sup>3</sup>; the Celtic sun, healing, and horse god Belinus or Belenus (bright) or Apollo Belenus and fertility god Cernunnos; the Celtic war

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<sup>3</sup> The Welsh kings claimed their descent from Beli and Anna, the same as Baldr and Nanna (Jones 1995: 102).

god Belatucadrus (fair-shining one); the German pastoral god Beel; the Austrian pastoral god Belenos; the Russian god of light Bielbog (Byelobog) and of darkness Tschernobog (Chernobog); the Frank war god Hadu; the Etruscan conveyer of the dead Charun; the Greek Apollo or Phoebus (bright) and ferryman Charon; the Greek Pollux and Castor; Ba'al or Bel or Belus, the Syrian sun and sky god, Vahagn and Hayk, and Sin the moon god; the Saxon god Baeldaeg<sup>4</sup> or Beldegg (bright day) and Siggi (victor); Herebeald and Haethcyn<sup>5</sup>; and Beal and Sighe. They are also equivalent to the Canaan brother gods Abel and Cain. Cain is said to be a man of agriculture:

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?"

He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

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<sup>4</sup> In Old English the word *bealdor* is a name for 'lord' and might have arisen from the name of this god into an honorific title. It also recalls the Syrian Bel, also meaning 'lord'.

<sup>5</sup> Herebeald and Haethcyn may be written as Here-Beald and Heath-Cyn. These might retain both a name and title of the gods: Beald is Baldr and Heath is Hod, while the name Cyn conforms to both Sin and Cain.

Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me.”

Then the Lord said to him, “Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.”

And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.<sup>6</sup> (Genesis 4:2-16, RSV)

Belenus may be connected to Celtic solar festival Beltene or Beltane (bealtain); *bealtine* or *beiltine* means beal fire (Grimm 2004: 612-613). Cernunnos (horned one) was a Celtic god of fertility, abundance, regeneration and wild animals. He was depicted as having ears of a stag and wearing antlers.<sup>7</sup> He was associated with the shedding of antlers and thus growth and regeneration. (Adkins 2000: 45) The crescent Moon is also likened to horns and antlers.<sup>8</sup> The possible association of Hod with reindeer and elks links the antler as symbolic of the seasonal cycle.

Condensing the general myth into a simple naturalistic explanation: the two brothers Summer/Sun (Baldr) and Winter/Moon (Hod) fought over the Earth (Nanna) and Winter was always vanquished upon Summer’s return, when the sun rose back in the sky. They at least would have been representative of seasonal changes and thus rebirth. This seems primarily to be

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<sup>6</sup> The Cain and Abel story is quite distinct from that of Adam and Eve and Noah. Both stories explain the labor required for agriculture. God says to Adam “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.” (Genesis 3:17-18, RSV) Compare this to when God says to Cain “And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength” (Genesis 4:11-12, RSV). Thereafter it says “Noah was the first tiller of the soil.” (Genesis 9:20, RSV)

<sup>7</sup> Would there be any connection between the killing of Baldr by Hod with a mistletoe dart and the killing of Beli by Frey with a stag’s antler? The antler is associated with Cernunnos who is equivalent to Hod. However, the only way this seems possible is if a substitution was made and Frey took the place of Hod. There is at least some equivalence between the trio Baldr, Hod, Nanna and Beli, Frey, Gerd. Idunn also holds a place, who like Gerd is to have embraced her brother’s killer.

<sup>8</sup> Cernunnos might be associated with the Moon. Sin is also a god of the Moon and skin disease and Cain was said to have a mark upon him.

an agricultural myth that arose during the Neolithic in Syria then moved into Europe as the knowledge of agriculture spread.<sup>9</sup> In its original form, the story may have been a myth about the creation of the world. Cain made the earth out of his brother's body, the blood of Abel having caused the red earth. This is similar to the story of Belus, who divided the heaven from the earth and then had himself beheaded, and the blood mixed with the earth produced mankind (Grimm 2004: p. 571).

### **Nanna and Inanna**

In the Eddas Nanna is the devoted wife of Baldr and daughter of Nep.<sup>10</sup> Nanna is related to the Syrian goddess Inanna, Innini, Nannar, or Nana (also known as Ishtar). Inanna's sister Erishkigal ruled over the underworld. As with other dual goddesses of the bright and gloomy, she might represent Inanna's shadow side. Inanna's descent into the underworld has many comparable points to the death of Baldr. Inanna is the Morning Star and her brother Utu is the Sun, children of the Moon god and goddess.

In the series of tablets that record her myths Utu tells his sister Inanna, the Queen of Heaven, that she will marry the shepherd Dumuzi. Inanna rather wishes to wed the farmer, but does ultimately accept Dumuzi as her husband. Inanna descends into the underworld for the funeral of Guglananna, husband of her older sister Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld. There Ereshkigal turns her into a corpse but she is retrieved and revived by Enki's servants. In order that she may return to the world of the living the demons of the underworld claim her husband

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<sup>9</sup> Adoption of agriculture in northern Europe occurred shortly before 4000 BC.

<sup>10</sup> Nep is related to Nek or Necker (nix, nigr), a sea sprite or sea god, as with Neptune (Grimm 2004: 488).

Dumuzi in her place. Dumuzi dreams a terrible vision of his fate. When the demons come for him his sister Geshtinanna protects him, but his friend betrays his location to them. Dumuzi is slain and his wife Inanna and mother Sirtur mourn him. Geshtinanna and Inanna are informed where Dumuzi is and they find him sitting and weeping. Inanna proclaims Geshtinanna will spend half the year in the underworld in Dumuzi's place.

The myth reveals the seasonal cycle when Dumuzi is permitted to be united with his wife for only half the year, at which time there is fertility in the land.<sup>11</sup> Dumuzi here is the Baldr character: dreaming of his own death, being betrayed by his friend, and finally returning to the world.<sup>12</sup> That Inanna must choose between a shepherd and a farmer parallels the story of Cain and Abel, when it is Semitic Yahweh who is choosing.<sup>13</sup>

Atargatis, Astraea, Astar, Astarte<sup>14</sup>, and Ishtar, whose name means "the veiled bride" (Ananikian 1964: 39), is the same Syrian earth goddess, and she is also equivalent to Nanna. So then the consort of the goddess, Ba'al, Bel (lord), or Ba'al Shamin (lord of heaven), the Syrian sky god and patron of farmers and shepherds (Adkins 2000: 29), would also be equivalent to Baldr through this relation. Like Hod and Baldr, the Syrian Vahagn defeated Ba'al and the Babylonian Hayk shot Bel with an arrow (Ananikian 1964: 34, 65).

Idunn too seems to arise from the same source as Nanna; that is, the Syrian goddess Inanna (Ishtar).<sup>15</sup> There are certain similarities between Inanna's descent into the underworld and Idunn's descent into the underworld, told in Guerber.

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<sup>11</sup> This too resembles the story of the Greek Persephone who spends two seasons (spring, summer) among the gods and one (winter) in the underworld.

<sup>12</sup> In Fridthiof's saga Baldr is referred to as a "bonde" (Anderson 1901: 82), just as Apollo was known as a herdsman of cattle.

<sup>13</sup> In Sumer a king would take the place of Dumuzi, offering gifts to the goddess. If he were accepted the ritual marriage would take place (Kramer 1983: 154).

<sup>14</sup> This goddess is also similar to Ostara and Eastre.

<sup>15</sup> A goddess with at least a similar name to Idunn is Arduinna, the Celtic goddess of the Ardennes forest. She appeared, however, more like Freyia, riding a boar and holding a dagger in her right hand (Adkins 2000: 16).

Idun was once sitting upon the branches of the sacred ash Yggdrasil when, growing suddenly faint, she loosed her hold and dropped to the ground beneath, and down to the lowest depths of Niflheim. There she lay, pale and motionless, gazing with fixed and horror-struck eyes upon the gruesome sights of Hel's realm, trembling violently the while, like one overcome by penetrating cold.

Seeing that she did not return, Odin bade Bragi, Heimdall, and another of the gods go in search of her, giving them a white wolfskin to envelop her in, so that she should not suffer from the cold, and bidding them make every effort to rouse her from the stupor which his prescience told him had taken possession of her.

Idun passively allowed the gods to wrap her in the warm wolfskin, but she persistently refused to speak or move, and from her strange manner her husband sadly suspected that she had had a vision of great ills. The tears ran continuously down her pallid cheeks, and Bragi, overcome by her unhappiness, at length bade the other gods return to Asgard without him, vowing that he would remain beside his wife until she was ready to leave Hel's dismal realm. The sight of her woe oppressed him so sorely that he had no heart for his usual merry songs, and the strings of his harp were mute while he remained in the underworld. (Guerber 1992: 108-110)

It is then likely that that the same goddess made her way to the north twice, through two different mythic traditions.

## **Baldr and Grendel**

While the myth of Balder's slaying combines two main stories: the slaying of Baldr by Hod and the binding of Loki, the story of Baldr also appears itself to incorporate two different stories, both attested in *Beowulf*. The first is the contest between Herebeald and Haethcyn:

“While I was his ward, he treated me no worse  
as a wean about the place than one of his own boys,  
Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac.  
For the eldest, Herebeald, an unexpected  
deathbed was laid out, through a brother’s doing,  
when Haethcyn bent his horn-tipped bow  
and loosed the arrow that destroyed his life.  
He shot wide and buried a shaft  
in the flesh and blood of his own brother.  
That offence was beyond redress, a wrongfooting  
of the heart’s affections; for who could avenge  
the prince’s life or pay his death-price?”  
(Heaney 2000: 165)

The second component of the story is the slaying of Grendel by Beowulf. Although his mother is unnamed, Grendel seems to be equivalent to Orendel (Erentel)<sup>16</sup>, who is the Morning Star.<sup>17</sup> This would suggest that the Morning Star was taken to be the son or husband of the Sun, where Bertha was the Sun. This might be confirmed by the name Gerutha given by Saxo for the wife of Orvendil. Just as Grytha in Saxo is Brytha or Bertha, so Gerutha would be Berutha or Bertha. This also matches the wife of Erentel, whose name was Breide. Thus Grendel’s mother was the goddess of death who lived beneath the fens. Frigg’s dwelling was called *Fensalir* (fen-hall), which resembles the bog in where Grendel’s mother resides. The light that sometimes appears over marshes at night (*ignis fatuus*) could have been seen as reflecting from the Sun’s

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<sup>16</sup> Orendel was the first hero. Grimm summarizes his exploits: “He suffers shipwreck on a voyage, takes shelter with a master fisherman, *Eisen*, earns the seamless coat of his master, and afterwards wins frau *Breide*, the fairest of women: king *Eigel* of Trier was his father’s name.” (Grimm 2004: 374)

<sup>17</sup> Grendel’s toe or claw appears to reflect the shape of the Morning Star.

subterranean dwelling. This is certainly referred to when the *Beowulf* poet says: “At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns.” (Heaney 2000: 95)

Grendel himself is immune to injury by any blade, just as Baldr cannot be harmed by any weapon. After his defeat, Grendel escapes back to the fen where he is said to die in Hell, just as Baldr is said to go to Hel after his death. Also, Grendel’s mother is equivalent to Bertha, who in the north was the goddess Frigg. Some time later then the story of the Sun and the death of her son was combined with the story of the two brothers.

## **Conclusion**

The overall idea of the spread of the gods out from Syria can be seen through their association with agriculture and the widespread presence of the gods’ names. Although they exist as two different variants: one being Bal and Hod the other being Bal and Cyn, these are both represented in the name Haeth-cyn. The origin of the myth relates to an explanation of seasonal variation: summer against winter. In Syrian myth it is the contest between a shepherd and a farmer, where Inanna is the judge between them, which compares to Abel and Cain being judged by Yahweh.

Exactly when this spread of the myth occurred is hard to place specifically, however the wide spread and diversity implies a longer rather than shorter history. Just as differences in language is greater as time passes so too is change in the telling of a myth, so the most obvious time for the great spread of an agricultural myth would have been during the time when agriculture was moving out from Mesopotamia, from 10,000 years ago through to when it was adopted into

Northern Europe about 5,000 years ago. Baldr might have been brought west by the Celts into Europe from the east, which is somewhat reinforced by the presence of the Gaulic Apollo (Belenus) in Caesar's *Gallic War* 2,000 years ago. The lack of any other strong equivalencies between Syrian and Scandinavian mythologies would also indicate that these gods would be ancient ones that found their way to the north at an early time, remaining there without as much change or influence as they would receive further south.

The Syrian Inanna also shares similarities with both Baldr's wife Nanna and the goddess of rebirth Idunn, all of whom play a significant role in a story of a descent into the underworld and redemption, associated with seasonal change.

The Norse myth of Baldr's death may be a combination of two independent stories attested in *Beowulf*. The original story of Bertha's son, the Morning Star Erendel (Grendel), that in the north would have been a son of Frigg, was changed when this son was equated with the god Bal.

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