

**“The Thunderstorm” and “The Morning Star”:
Rediscovering Two German Myths
by Timothy J. Stephany**
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Abstract:

The Norse myth of Freyia’s Necklace and the Grendel episode in *Beowulf* are variations on original naturalistic Germanic myths. The first explains the sequence of a thunderstorm and the second explains the Morning Star. Each exists in only a single reliable telling but enough ancillary evidence exists to be able to identify their original inspirations. In the case of Freyia’s Necklace the characters of the Sun (Freyia), Moon/Water (Heimdall) and Fire/Lightning (Loki) contend, while in the case of the story of Grendel the poem is too far removed to provide every episode that must have comprised an original myth. That it involved the Sun and her child the Morning Star is sure, but whether the character of Beowulf was originally represented by the Moon, the thunderstorm or a bear-hero cannot be resolved. Assuming that the myth was exclusively related to heavenly bodies the Moon would be the obvious hero, so if this is correct the myth would have involved Bertha, Orvendil and Heimdall or a proto-Heimdall. An illustrative recreation of the myth can be generated to show how the story as originally told could have eventually led to its subsequent forms today.

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Introduction

The mythology of Germany proper is only present in the form in which it existed in the Norse culture as kept alive and recorded in Iceland, and even then well after Christianity had established itself. By even the time of the Viking era the myths of the Heimdallic tradition had been long since overtaken by the dominant aspects of the Odinic and Baldric mythologies, including the stories of the Mead of Poetry and of Balder's Death. The strongest remaining element of the Heimdallic that survived was the antagonism that existed between Heimdall and Loki and their ultimate contest at the end of the world.

However, the transmission of forms of these German myths still occurred, although in two almost unrecognizable forms: the theft of Freyia's necklace and the story of Grendel and Beowulf. Fortunately, enough of the elements exist to permit recognition of the original naturalistic meanings behind these myths. In the first of these cases the myth explained the thunderstorm with the gods Heimdall, Loki and Freyia, and in the second the myth explained the Morning Star with the characters of Beowulf, Grendel, and Grendel's mother.

The Thunderstorm

The Norse myth of the theft of Freyia's necklace is told by Guerber in this manner:

Heimdall immediately started out in pursuit of the midnight thief, and quickly overtaking him, he drew his sword from its scabbard, with intent to cut off his head, when the god transformed himself into a flickering blue flame. Quick as thought, Heimdall changed himself into a cloud and sent down a deluge of rain to

quench the fire; but Loki as promptly altered his form to that of a huge polar bear, and opened wide his jaws to swallow the water. Heimdall, nothing daunted, then likewise assumed the form of a bear, and attacked fiercely; but the combat threatening to end disastrously for Loki, the latter changed himself into a seal, and, Heimdall imitating him, a last struggle took place, which ended in Loki being forced to give up the necklace, which was duly restored to Freya. (Guerber 1992: 150)

Alleviating some of the details, it follows in a simple sequence:

- 1) Loki steals Freyia's necklace Brisingamen
- 2) Heimdall pursues him and they battle
- 3) Heimdall recovers the necklace and returns it to Freyia

For the early Germanic people who were attempting to explain the rage of a thunderstorm, they could have put together this simple sequence of events:

- 1) The Fire, as lightning, fights against its enemy the Water, as rain
- 2) The battle goes on and is loud and lofty until it finally ceases
- 3) The Sun emerges and there in the sky is the rainbow, a necklace

This sequence fits very well with that of the Norse myth. In addition, it is known that Loki is a god of fire, and Heimdall as Moon god could also well have been a god of water¹ and is also strongly associated with the rainbow in the Eddas. These details are also proven through reverse theorizing², since it can be shown that the myth best represents an explanation of the

¹ Heimdall (Hama) appears to share a distant connection to Haenir, a god of water.

² Ordinary theorizing or Forward Theorizing assembles details and evidence to draw a conclusion, Reverse Theorizing uses a well-founded conclusion to explain ambiguous details.

thunderstorm. Freyia herself is the northern equivalent of Berchta, the German goddess of the Sun. Taken together, these are the three deities of the Germans as mentioned by Caesar in his *Gallic War* as Sun, Moon, and Fire.

The thunderstorm must have been a powerful and tremendous event to early humans, who in other mythic traditions regarded its high power as a god of Thunder; in the case of the Thorric tradition Thor riding on his wagon and fighting the frost giants with his hammer.

When looking at some of the details of this myth in Guerber, Loki is said to form into a flame, Heimdall put him out with water from a cloud, and then they go on to fight in the form of bears and seals. These animal forms could explain something of the sound of thunder, either sounding like a low roar of a bear or the wild slap of a seal.³ Why these gods were fighting would be explained by the inexplicable appearance of the rainbow when the Sun returned, that was seen to resemble a necklace. This might also explain why the German's believed that the Sun was undeniably female, since its appearance when the Sun shone again meant that it belonged to her, and the necklace was already a well established feminine ornament.

The Morning Star

Just like the myth of Freyia's Necklace the story of Grendel was initially naturalistic. Its appearance in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* marks its only full presence in any piece of writing that has survived to the present day, although Hrolf Kraki's saga and Saxo both contain the same rudimentary episode. *Beowulf* is a Christianized tale about the hero's confrontations with Grendel and a dragon, where an older and thus perhaps more telling version is not available.

³ It could also hearken to a time when animism was at the heart of mythology.

An interesting consideration still remains the relationship between the three sources: the saga of Hrolf Kraki, Saxo, and *Beowulf*. In terms of composition *Beowulf* is clearly the oldest at 7th to 10th century, with Saxo coming next in the 13th century and the *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* next in the 14th century. Since in *Beowulf* the story of Grendel takes more than half of the entire poem's attention while the latter two only make brief reference to the episode, it could either be that *Beowulf* is a more developed version of the single episode, or that the others represent a divergent tradition that built up over the centuries or composited further details. There is no strict way to determine which would be the case, especially since the two paths apparently diverged during the Migration Age, when Saxons entered England, which would imply that *Beowulf* represents something closer to the original telling, but became merely an episode within the others with time. There is also the matter of the second part of *Beowulf*, wherein he in later kingship fights a treasure-hoarding dragon. This piece did not continue in the Scandinavian version, and might not originally have had anything to do with the hero Beowulf.

The poem has Grendel attacking the Danish hall Heorot, when the Geat warrior Beowulf arrives. The basic sequence of events in the first part of *Beowulf* subsumed within the details is:

- 1) Grendel attacks and consumes warriors in a hall
- 2) Beowulf arrives and stays in the hall, pulling off the creature's arm
- 3) Grendel escapes to the swamp where he dies
- 4) The arm is hung on the high beams of the hall
- 5) Grendel's mother resumes the carnage and retrieves the arm
- 6) Beowulf pursues her to the underworld and they battle
- 7) Only able to match her by beheading her with a giant's sword
- 8) Then cutting off Grendel's head, he brings this back to the hall

When Beowulf first confronts Grendel the poem reveals that he took off the monster's entire arm and shoulder (Heaney 2000: 57) but elsewhere referred to his clawed right hand (Heaney 2000: 143). The poem as it exists was written during Christian times, but based on an older version, which itself had a history of compilation and revision, so there is no reason to believe that subsequent embellishments did not occur and that the hand was originally just a claw. However, it is the naturalistic elements of the story that might permit a reduction to its original form. The name Grendel (Earandel) already equates with Morning Star, which was a claw, while the Sun, Berchta, spent her nights beneath the fens causing the swamp to glow.

There is also the strange manner of sequencing, wherein Grendel is mortally wounded, yet when Beowulf goes to the underworld he fights and defeats Grendel's mother, brings back Grendel's head as proof of his demise. It appears that the original myth might have involved two contests with Beowulf, one wherein only the clawed hand was claimed, and down in the underworld where the hero finally defeats him in a contest, using a giant's sword *gylden-hilt* to finally behead the brute, then brings this up as proof of the final defeat. That Grendel would have had a mother is sure, but she would not necessarily have been the demon she is in this story. It does reveal that she came back and reclaim his severed hand, which might recall her later possession of the claw. Then after Grendel's mother (originally Grendel) is beheaded a light appears shining like the Sun, which might provide a final association with the goddess, as the Sun reappearing in the sky.

It is only what has survived through long transmission and adaptation that can be used to rebuild the original myth, however there is still another reference point, the sky itself. The early Germans who were first trying to explain this floating claw in the sky must then have associated it with the Sun. The claw indicated to them that the son of the Sun must have been some sort of

beast or bear. The events reflected in *Beowulf* can be reduced to a simple tale that might have constituted something like an original myth:

1. The Sun had a son, Morning Star, who had claws
2. This son was a bear, who consumed some of the Bear-Hero's companions
3. Bear-Hero fought with this beast and tore off its claw
4. He followed it down into the Sun's dwelling beneath the fens
5. There he fought again with the Morning Star and severed its head⁴

Thus the original story involves Grendel (Erentel, the Morning Star)⁵, Grendel's mother (Berchta, the Sun), and a conflict with a bear-hero who vanquishes Grendel. Since this story is designed to explain the heavens, the major absence in it is the Moon.

Who is Beowulf?

There is still a link missing between Beowulf and an object in the heavens who was Grendel's adversary. The most obvious one would be the Moon, who might be Heimdall. So can Heimdall be equated with Beowulf? There is no myth of such a contest and in the Anglo-Saxon poem the hero's name either means Bee-Wolf or Bear-Wolf (Byock 1998: xxv). It is perhaps related to the

⁴ It could be that in one particular form of this myth that the severed head then became the Moon (as occurred with the giant Mimir), and if this was a creation myth, that the body of the Erentel became the Earth (as occurred with the giant Ymir).

⁵ The first letter change from an E to a G could come about through linguistic shift, but it could just as well have been a misreading; an Old English E, for example, could be mistaken for a G.

Moon itself, which clearly depicts a wolf, as shown in *Figure 1*, although bee-wolf is most often taken to mean a bear.

Figure 1.
Image of a wolf or dog on the Moon



It is said of Heimdall that his ears were sacrificed under the tree (Larrington 1999: 7) and that he met his doom when sliced into by a human head (Sturluson 1987: 76). A contest with Grendel could explain the origin of the doom of Heimdall, where in some unknown episode he was struck with a man's head, which is visible on the Moon's face. It does recall a terrible contest, and in *Beowulf* the presence of Aeschere's head, left after the consumption of the man, is mentioned as having been found near the bog. It could be that this was the contest in which it occurred, but there is nothing that implies that Heimdall can be equated with Beowulf, it is only based upon the assumption that the myth explains the heavens, and that Heimdall is the god representing the Moon.

There is a variation, or alternative, within the Eddas, after the myth about Hrungrnir, wherein Thor explains how he broke off Aurvandil's (Erentel's) frost-bitten toe and threw it up into the sky. The white color of Venus would bring to mind a toe that had been frost-bitten and the

oblong shape of the planet, that never appears full from Earth, fits well as a toe. This seems to have been invented fairly late to explain the name of the Morning Star Venus as “Aurvandil’s Toe” and is a rather benign and trivial episode compared to the Grendel story. It is possible, however, to presume that the hero was not the Moon, but like Thor, the thunderstorm, who as stated before might have been associated with bears due to the roaring and growling thunder. The thunderstorm was seen as the most powerful of the gods, as with Thor, and in the case of Zeus as ruling over all.

There is also the possible connection between Biarki’s companion Hialti and Thor’s companion Thialfi who at least share similar names if not a similar role: in Thor’s contest with Hrungrnir, Thialfi takes down the clay giant Mokkurkalfi⁶ in the same manner that Hialti defeats the propped up monster before drinking its blood.⁷ It is possible that these original mythological episodes were recombined into a story that linked the Aurvendil’s Toe story with the duel with Hrungrnir, thus creating a contest between the thunderstorm (Beowulf) and the Morning Star (Grendel) that later became the poem that was subsequently transmitted, but the absence of other details would need to be explained. It is more likely that whoever wrote the myth worked in the other direction, taking the root story and building it into a myth about Thor battling a giant, while also including the toe episode that was otherwise left out.⁸

Also to be considered here are Hercules and Hylas, considering their equivalence with Thor and Thialfi⁹, as well as the super-human strength Hercules was to have possessed.¹⁰ This

⁶ It is also at the conclusion of this particular contest that the explanation for Aurvendil’s Toe comes.

⁷ The sense that eating a bear’s meat or drinking its blood and thus gaining strength might have originally come from the nutritional benefits gained, which at some point in the past might have been taken to be the animal’s energy being absorbed.

⁸ That Hrungrnir was known as Thrud’s abductor might recall an earlier version, which might also link it to the Bear’s Son folk tale.

⁹ Linguistically, (T)hercul-es related to Thorkill-us and (T)hyl-as related to Thial-fi and (T)hial-ti.

strength would appear to have arisen from his initial battle with the Nemean Lion, and there are interesting similarities here with the Beowulf story.

On reaching Nemea, he sought out the lion, and began by shooting arrows at it, but when he discovered that the beast was invulnerable, he raised his club and chased after it. When the lion took refuge in a cave which had two entrances, Heracles walled up one of them and went in through the other to attack the beast; and throwing his arm around his neck, he held it in a stranglehold until he had throttled it. And hoisting it on to his shoulders, he carried it back to Cleonai. (Apollodorus 1998: 76)

The beast menaces the town of Nemea just as Grendel attacks the hall of Heorot, Hercules follows the beast back to his cave, and likewise just as with Grendel the Lion is invulnerable to conventional weapons and thus he must engage in a match of strength with him. Other elements, however, are not present, including the Sun goddess and the removal of the beast's paw or claw.¹¹ Rather than beheading it, Hercules skins the animal with its own claw and wears it himself thus gaining the lion's powers. The most elevating aspect here would be the strengthened link between Hercules and Thor (Thorkillus), for establishing this link would bring further weight to the idea that the hero was the thunderstorm as a god with the strength of a bear or lion.¹²

¹⁰ There might be some equivalence too between Gerriod and Geryon, although the stories only bear a passing resemblance, it would be more secure if Gerriod could be equated with the giant Thrivaldi. (Thrivaldi himself might likewise be equivalent to the Hindu Trisiras.)

¹¹ There appears to have been several variants of the story; even within Norse mythology the poetic source *Haustlong* details the Hrungnir duel without including Thialfi. A comparison of the those versions included here reveals the varying combination of details.

¹² There is also good reason to regard, however, that Heimdall as god of the Moon was also god of water and the thunderstorm. The butting of rams horns would too associate them with a thunderclap as would the butting of goats, and the rumble of thunder with the roar of a lion or bear.

The Bear-Hero

The story within *Beowulf* is often equated with the ubiquitous Bear's Son folk tale, prevalent throughout Eurasia, where the strong hero is sometimes a bear's son (Byock 1998: xxvi). This tale too could have encompassed some passage of this initial tale about the Morning Star. In this case the hero with the strength of a bear, which Beowulf clearly possesses, is able to defeat the demonic creature and kill it in its lair, while subsequently releasing three princesses.¹³ The hero of this might not have been the Moon but was instead an early heroic character.

Before the comings of Heimdall and Odin there may have been only one Goddess, of the Sun, (perhaps the original European goddess) while the other players, Grendel and Beowulf were merely bears, or one a hero with a bear's strength (recall that the drinking of the bear's blood gives the hero a bear's strength). Perhaps the implication here is that the bear-hero in being able to tear off the bear's claw, and drink its blood, thereby acquired the bear's strength and with it was able to vanquish the beast in its lair.

There is a means though to tie these two together if it can be assumed that Beowulf (Biarki) was in some way associated with the Moon, perhaps Heimdall or a pre-cursor to him, as an early tribal hero. The crescent Moon itself can be viewed as a bear claw and might have provided a plausible explanation to early humans. The pairing of the crescent Moon with the Morning Star is an iconic image that has been adopted on several modern national flags and was depicted as rock art by stone-age humans. Whether as awe-inspiring for its beauty or its significance there seems good reason to suppose that people would ask what they were and how they were related, and tell their story.

¹³ Three might well relate to the idea of the Sun as travelling with two companions, Dawn and Dusk.

The reference to Biarki having a bear's claw on his toe in *Bjarkarimur* (Byock 1998: 40, footnote 47) is quite a bit more similar to Aurvendil's toe that would link the Eddic story with that of *Beowulf*. As Biarki is clearly a bear-hero, descended from a mother and father who were bears in Hrolf Kraki's saga, and is named Beowulf (Bear) in that poem, there is also a suggestion that the original beast he contended with was a bear. In Saxo, after a brief recounting of the wedding feast where Biarki saved Hialti from the bones thrown at him, and a contest between Biarki and Agner as a result, there follows an account of the Grendel episode:

As the champions eagerly sought his revenge they were dealt a similar fate by Biarki with the unusually long and sharp sword which he called Lovi. While he was still rejoicing in his triumphs, a wild creature from the woods provided him with a further victory. When a gigantic bear met him among the thickets he dispatched it with his javelin and then told Hialti, his comrade, to apply his mouth and suck out the beast's blood so that he might achieve greater strength; for it was believed that this type of drink afforded an increased bodily vigor. (Grammaticus 1979: 55)

Although in both the late saga and the artificial manifestation in *Beowulf* he appears as a fanciful creature, a bear seems a more credible adversary. The identical episode is recounted in a very similar variation in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*:

As Yuletide drew near, gloom settled over the men. Bodvar asked Hott what caused their dejection. Hott told him that a huge, monstrous beast had come there the past two winters. 'The creature has wings on its back and it usually flies. For two autumns now it has come here, causing much damage. No weapon can bite into it, and the king's champions, even the greatest among them, do not return home.' (Byock 1998: 50)

This recalls Grendel clearly (apart from the wings that equate it more with the dragon):

When they joined the struggle there was something they could not have known at the time, that no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art could ever damage their demon opponent. He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge of every weapon. (Heaney 2000: 53)

Then the particular episode unfolds as follows:

They now left the hall behind them, and Bodvar carrying Hott because he was so frightened. They saw the creature, and immediately Hott started to scream as loudly as he could, crying that the beast would swallow him.¹⁴ Bodvar told the dog to be quiet and threw him down on the moor. There he lay, not a little scared, at the same time not daring to go home.

Bodvar now went against the beast. He was hampered by his sword, which, as he tried to draw it, stuck fast in its scabbard. Determined, Bodvar urged the sword out until the scabbard squeaked. Then he grasped the scabbard and the sword came out of the sheath. Immediately he thrust it up under the beast's shoulder, striking so hard that the blade reached into the heart. Then the best fell dead to the ground. (Byock 1998: 50-51)

Bodvar then takes Hott to the beast and has him drink the blood and eat some of the heart, thus making Hott strong from it. Then propping up the beast to make it seem alive, Hott is then sent with the sword Golden Hilt to attack the cadaver, causing it to fall. Hott thereafter goes by the name Hialti. Bodvar in this tale also goes by the name of Biarki, which means "little bear" (Byock 1998: xxvii).¹⁵ In this version is a reflection of the episode where Beowulf goes into the underworld and slays Grendel's mother with the sword *golden-hilt*, but other elements such as the drinking of the blood and the setting up of the body, simply indicate how divergent they have become. They do agree, however, that the creature was killed during the first encounter and then

¹⁴ This recalls somewhat the reaction of Mokkurkalfi to Thor and thus perhaps the recycling of details.

¹⁵ These name changes might hold a significance, but such mythical name changes appear merely to be an attempt to reconcile two different tellings, as in this case one with Hott and Bodvar and one with Hialti and Biarki which was also used by Saxo.

only a symbolic killing followed, where in this second encounter Beowulf himself cuts off the head of the dead body of Grendel. This however goes against the general form of the Bear Son's tale.

Still the somewhat more rudimentary version of Saxo contains the specific detail that the creature was in fact a bear, which may have escaped the dramatic demonization of Grendel and the romantic flourishes of saga tellers. With this additional missing piece it is possible to put together a myth centering around such a contest. The pieces, however do not fall together cleanly, since the clawed toe that would appear to be Aurvendil's (Grendel's) is said to belong to Biarki (Beowulf), while it can only be presumed that the beast Grendel (an otherwise unnamed bear) had claws on all its toes, one of which would have to have been torn off by the bear-hero to properly equate it with the Beowulf contest.

However, each of these three tellings of the theorized myth is too far removed to be able to properly assemble the sequence with any confidence. It is possible that greater interest and a more comprehensive assemblage of sources and details would permit a more satisfying resolution.

Rebuilt Myth of the Morning Star

Unlike the myth of the thunderstorm, which exists in written form as the Necklace story, the actual myth of the Morning Star is no longer extant in any pure form. There is reason to believe it was originally part of a creation myth. It clearly goes back to an earlier time and seems to have existed into rather late times, having avoided direct transmission, as all continental German

myths shared this same fate. However, it can be reclaimed to some extent with details from *Beowulf*, the two later variants, and the tale of the Bear's Son.

Although the specific details are open to wide variation, some embellishment of the basic sequence is possible and can be widened upon assumptions that the bear hero can be equated with the Moon or proto-Heimdall, which is not well verified by the evidence. It at least illustrates a form which could have provided material for the poems and mythology that followed (from which it has been constructed).

*Out of those swamps emerged a savage beast
During the night, when Bear-Hero slept, to feast
It crept to the hall and gobbled men down
So when it next came out of the swamp at night
Bear-Hero waited and fiercely wrestled with it
The furious and fetid creature fought
Bear-Hero grabbed fast Erendel's wild claw
With divine strength he cleaved it free
Leaving the beast to flee to its foul fen
He followed the demon down into the depths
Beneath the bogs he found the bear's home
Where Erendel had grown, from out of the scum
Within the spring that bubbled beneath the ground
There Berchta the fountain's goddess being bound
Encouraged him to drink from those waters
To gain the strength required to vanquish the brute
He drank of the fountain that would grant him might*

*Then in that hole the second contest was fought
When Erendel emerged from a dark hanging rock
One fell swipe clawed off Bear-Hero's right ear
A second took off his left, and so there they were
Then gaining the upper hand, grabbing Erendel
With the sacred sword severed trunk from head
But with the will of demonic power's fury
Reaching to the human heads that were strewn around
Taking one by the hair, he threw it hard at the God
It struck him with force and that was his Doom
Then that fetid beast fell, only bleeding black ooze
At that moment the Sun was set free to shine
To spread warmth and light on her way above
She carries that claw near her still to this day*

Conclusion

The collection of Eddic myths only represents a mythic tradition of the latest times and amounts to some subset of those from Scandinavia. Earlier traditions became diminished with the arrival of new mythical conceptions and what remained of them was even further diminished by the lack of any proper recording of the German mythic tradition. This was likely the result of the strength of Christianity in central Europe during the Middle Ages, the seeming lack of importance of these old tales, and the lack of a strong national tradition that needed to arise and assert itself.

With knowledge of initial German gods as attested first by Caesar, it is possible to see the presence of the continuance of German myths within other contexts, wherein their separation from their source is broad enough so as to have masked their original meaning. The Norse myth of Freyia's Necklace and the Grendel episode in *Beowulf* are variations on such original Germanic myths, where the naturalistic meanings explained the sequence of a thunderstorm in the case of Freyia's Necklace and the Morning Star in the case of the Grendel story.

In the myth of Freyia's Necklace the Moon/Water (Heimdall) and Fire/Lightning (Loki) were thought to contend for the necklace of the Sun (Freyia). In the story of the Morning Star, the versions are too far removed to provide every episode that must have comprised an original myth, but the oldest version in *Beowulf*, removed from its Christianized embellishments, appears to represent the best starting point. That it involved the Sun and her child the Morning Star is sure, but whether the character of Beowulf was originally the Moon, the thunderstorm, a bear-hero or any combination of these is not presently resolvable. Assuming that the myth was exclusively related to heavenly bodies the Moon would be the obvious hero, so if this is correct the myth would have involved Bertha, Orvendil and Heimdall or an earlier form of or precursor to Heimdall. The illustrative recreation of the myth has been generated to show how the story as originally told might have eventually led to its subsequent forms known today.

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