

THE MAIDEN WITH THE MEAD

A GODDESS OF INITIATION IN NORSE
MYTHOLOGY?

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PROLOGUE

I have had the idea of investigating the subject of an initiating goddess in Norse mythology for many years. There was *something there*, I knew it, but I did not know *what* it was until I sat down to write the initiatory title of the project-to-be. The only thing I could think that these myths had in common was the image of a maiden serving mead - and a sacred marriage associated with it. I was very pleased to realize that this common image was only the tip of the iceberg.

The illustrations I drew myself, looking at photos from Hilda Ellis Davidson's beautiful book *Scandinavian Mythology*.

I could not find the Icelandic types required to write Old Norse on my computer, so I have used:

th for Icelandic
d for Icelandic
ö for Icelandic

I am very grateful for all help and support: To Ragnfrid Stokke who took the time to correct my English, to my tutors at the University of Oslo, Sigurd Hjelde and Gunnhild Røthe. To my parents, friends and family, lots of love.

"Crawl to your mother, the Earth;
-she will save you from the void."

Rig Veda 10.18

"There Earth shall meet Thorr, her son;
she will show him the kinspeoples' way to Ódinn's lands."

Harbardsljod, st. 56, Poetic Edda

1. I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together, calling it honey.
2. When you penetrate inside, you will know no limits(...)
3. We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods(...)
5. The glorious drops that I have drunk set me free in wide space(...)
11. Weaknesses and diseases have gone; the forces of darkness have fled in terror. Soma has climbed up in us, expanding. We have come to the place where they stretch out our life-spans.
12. The drop that we have drunk has entered our hearts, an immortal inside mortals (...)

Rig Veda, 8. 48

1: Introduction

This dissertation will take as its starting point a recurring theme in the Poetic Edda, namely the supernatural maiden offering a cup or a horn of precious mead to a hero. This theme is encountered in the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, most specifically in the poem *Sigrdrifumál*, and in divine poems such as the *Hávamál*, the *Skirnismál*, and the *Hyndluljóð*. The valkyrie who offers the mead in the *Sigrdrifumál* is said to be a reincarnation or a continuation of other valkyries met with in the heroic poems of Helgi Hörvardsson and Helgi Hundingsbani, which makes it necessary to study all these poems in order to form a complete picture of the “Maiden with the Mead”. I will also add to my study the poem “*Svípdagsmál*¹”, because the structure of the poem is comparable to the structure of the other poems studied in this dissertation. Thus many poems, each with their own history of research and interpretations, will be touched upon, and I may obviously not deal with all the details of each poem. The main aim, however, is to detect a common structure within each of the stories. I wish to show that they are all, in essence, telling the same tale, even though they all have their particular poetic flavouring, their own particular contexts and purpose. My desire is to show that behind the different poetical scenarios, a common mythical pattern is to be observed: that of sacred initiation centered around the figure of the Great Goddess, who may take many names and shapes.

We will only slightly touch upon the kind of initiation that the poems are dealing with. Within the limits of this study there is not much room for discussing whether we are seeing the reflection of initiation to manhood, warriorhood, a secret society, a mystery cult, kingship or a religious office. Considering the amount of participants and the diversity between them in the stories, I suspect that the “Maiden” as initiator is a part of a general pattern of initiation. The kind of trials and the kind of teachings that the supposed initiate has to go through will be dealt with through the presentation of the poems, but since we are covering so many different stories there is not much space for an in-depth study. Our focus will be on the structural pattern of themes, as well as on the figure of

¹ “*Svípdagsmál*” is a scholar’s title for the two poems *Gróagaldur* and *Fjölsvinnsmál* combined (See ch. 5)

the “Maiden” and the mythology surrounding her. I employ the word “Maiden” rather than “woman” or “goddess”. Firstly, the character in question is in the sources usually referred to as a *mær* (pl.f. *meyiar*), which means a maiden in the sense of a young woman, usually but not necessarily unmarried. Secondly because her goddess-hood is ambivalent; she sometimes appears as a giantess, sometimes as a valkyrie. In spite of this, I maintain that we may speak of a “Great Goddess” behind these characters, since the differences in official status (giantess, goddess, valkyrie) is less significant than the likeness in function. In this I am basing myself on the tradition of Folke Ström and Britt Mari Näsström who identify widely different mythical character as aspects of the same Great Goddess, as well as Else Mundal who also argues a theory of hypostases, where the difference between the collective of deities and one singular deity may not always be so strict within the cult. It is my conviction that it is possible to form a more detailed picture of the cult of the Maiden goddess and its philosophy through analysis of the patterns and structures of mythology hiding behind the medieval Icelandic poems.

The motif of a maiden serving mead is also found in many images from the Viking Age, carved on rock – especially memorial stones at burial places – or woven on hangings. The pictorial motif of the maiden with the horn is often interpreted as a valkyrie (*valkyrja*, f.) welcoming the dead One-Harrier (*einheri*, m.) as he arrives in *Valhöll* (f.). *Valhöll* – “the Hall of the Chosen Ones” - is often understood as a kind of Heaven for those who die in battle, led by Ódinn, who in the tradition of Snorri is the ruler of all the gods. However, the *Poetic Edda* allows both giantesses and goddesses, as well as valkyries, to serve the “precious mead”, “the ancient mead”, “the memory drink”, “the adored mead” and the “poetry-stir” to worthy heroes. In none of these stories is it clear that we are reading about a dead one-harrier and a valkyrie in *Valhöll*. However, the link to an afterlife is strong since the images are found on burial monuments and within graves. Michael Enright has shown how womens’ mead-offering in a hall constituted the central part of a very common and very significant ritual in all Germanic (and also in Celtic) societies, a ritual which had nothing to do with the afterlife but rather with kingship and hierarchical bonding within a warband -a theory that we shall return to in ch. 3.2. Through a survey of European archaeological finds, Enright has also proven the

actual existence of what he calls “ladies with a mead-cup”, that is, great ladies buried with liquor-serving device in hand and many associated objects. The continuity and regularity of these finds shows that the mead-serving high-born woman was an important person in all Germanic societies for more than a millennia, and Enright questions whether she be a queen, a noblewoman, or, originally, a kind of priestess. We will come back to this question in ch. 8.5 with the hope of throwing some more light on the Maiden figure.

Through a study of the symbols of the realm and kinsfolk surrounding the Maiden, we will see that whether she be goddess, valkyrie or giantess, the essentials remain the same in all the poems. The symbolism is connected to the world of the dead and may be traced to the particular death-realm of Hel where eagles, serpents and wolf-dogs devour the corpses of the dead, where rivers and bridges carry loud sounds, where the fences and halls are high, and within which, mysteriously, a bright realm of immortality is to be found. The fact that the symbolism of the Maiden’s realm resembles Hel’s is puzzling to everyone who are brought up to think that there are strict geographical borders between the Underworld of Hel and the Heaven of Ódinn, *Valhöll*. One of the resulting conclusions of my study must be that there are no such geographical borders in the mythological sphere, and no actual borders between the races of giants, gods or valkyries. What we are seeing must be aspects or levels of the same reality: The world where the valkyrie offers life-giving mead to the One-Harrier may be an aspect of the same world where Hel keeps the bright mead covered by a shield.² Yet it is a level of this same world where the hero has overcome the monstrous beings of absolute extinction in death. He has walked into the realm of death and has come out alive, following the pattern of Ódinn the “Hel-Blinder” and Hermodr who jumps over the gates of death without touching them³, returning to the world of the living with hidden knowledge. It is the idea of immortality in one form or another - I believe in close connection to an initiation rite - that can be detected within the myths of the Maiden. The Maiden herself appears in different guises in each of the stories. In those stories which may be placed back in the beginning of mythical time, where the gods are the heroes who undergo the trials, the

² See *Baldrs draumar*, st. 7

³ See *Gylfaginning*, Faulkes 1987, p. 49-50

Maiden is a giantess hidden underground. Later, when human beings follow in the footsteps of Ódinn and Freyr, she appears as a dazzling goddess or a valkyrie. One could almost suspect that through her union with the gods of the ordered world, this primeval creature becomes an agent of this same world and thus a divine being herself. Not only may the goddesses be identified with the giantesses through their similar functions, but the valkyries of the heroic poems illustrate the point of a common reality behind different names perfectly –for they are said to be reincarnations of the same being over and over again.

Through a study of a common structure in all the different poems that we are considering, we may draw the main conclusion: a common myth must lie behind the imagery of all these poems: the myth of a Maiden who dwells in the heart of Misty Hel, and who may be brought out to marry the worthy hero, a union which includes esoteric knowledge and perhaps even an alternative to extinction in death. Within this myth we may see traces of a ritual, cult or ecstatic experience where the devoted hero undergoes trials of overcoming greed, pride, hate and death in order to learn the arts of healing, eloquence, manliness and wisdom.

To prove my thesis, I will systematically try to detect significant structural elements that recur in all or most of these myths. We will see that the pattern detected could very much resemble a ritual of initiation. We will also throw some light upon what I shall call “Maiden-mythology” – a mythology of the goddess that I believe may be traced in the Poetic Edda, but which has been rather unexplored until now. To some degree I will make use of a philological method where I let the meanings of names and place-names determine my understanding of the texts.

As for translation of the original texts and names, I have basically used the dictionary from Old Norse to Norwegian called “Norrøn Ordbok”, as well as Rudolf Simek’s “Dictionary of Norse Mythology”, and interpretations presented by various scholars in the secondary sources. In addition to Sophus Bugge’s rendering of the original texts of the Poetic Edda, I have used the translations of these texts into English by Carolyne

Larrington, and into the Norwegian by Ludvig Holm-Olsen and by Ivar Mortensson-Egnund. Since the respective translations differ from each other, I have in some places found it necessary to do some translation on my own according to my understanding.

2: Sources

2.1: The *Poetic Edda*

My main source will be the *Poetic Edda*, also known as the Elder Edda. In the year 1643, an Icelandic bishop called Brynjolf Sveinsson came across an old manuscript containing poems about gods and legendary heroes, poems largely unknown by the educated people of those days. Many of the stanzas that Snorri Sturluson had quoted in his prose work about pagan poetry, the “*Edda*”, from 1220-1225 A.D. were recognized, and the bishop assumed that Snorri’s Edda must have been based on this “elder, poetic *Edda*”. Brynjolf himself called the manuscript *Sæmundar Edda*, because he believed that the poems must have been written down by the famous monk Sæmund the Wise, a belief which has not been confirmed by later scholars. The Latin name given to the old collection was *Codex Regius*, thus named because it was soon sent as a gift to king Fredrik III of Denmark. Not counting the eight pages that had been torn out of the manuscript, the *Codex Regius* contains 29 poems, five of which are also found in another Icelandic manuscript from about 1300. In this manuscript is also found a poem that is not found in the *Codex*, namely the poem *Baldrs draumar* (or the *Vegtamskvida*). Both manuscripts have an older, common origin. Because of the letters and the language, it is believed that the *Codex* was written down on Iceland at the end of the 13th century, yet many of the poems are quoted in Snorri’s Edda, which was written around 1220.

The poems are based on myth and legends that are older than the settling of Iceland; some legendary poems include historical characters from the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. For this reason, many scholars believed that the poems were very old, but in 1871, Edvin Jessen concluded that the poems were created in the Viking Age and that only some parts are of older origin. In the form in which they have been transmitted, they are mostly from the 11th and 12th century, some perhaps even as late as from the 13th century, and most of them were created in Iceland, although some are of Norwegian origin. During transmission, scholars assume that changes and innovations have taken place. There are, for example, three different versions of the poem *Voluspá*, all with rather fundamental differences from each other. The idea that the poems are not “authentic” rendering of

Pagan myth, however, has been criticized by many scholars who argue that poets were unlikely to invent mythical imagery that was not recognizable to the listeners already, and archaeology has shown that a great many myths rendered in the Poetic Edda have their far older pictorial versions: proving that these myths existed in pre-Christian times.⁴

2.2: Divine Poems

The *Codex* arranges the poems systematically in poems about the gods - Divine Poems and Heroic Poems. The manuscript contains ten Divine Poems, and from other manuscripts we know of three more poems, thirteen in all. Every poem stands on its own and has to be studied separately. The poems are referring to myths, tales about the fundamental actions of the gods in the beginning of time. According to Ludvig Holm-Olsen the original myths that the poems are based on have existed in poetic forms over the whole Norse-speaking area in pagan times. Parts of the mythology clearly belong to the common Indoeuropean heritage, and there are some striking similarities to old Indian religion. Many of the myths may be closely connected to cult and ritual drama, where human beings would enact the roles of mythical beings. Holm-Olsen states that it has proven difficult to find the pagan cultic connection to the myths because the poems have been written down in Christian times and probably undergone some censorship and changes due to the new religion. The way the poems are presented, they are influenced by a time that saw the pagan myths as entertainment or material particularly interesting for *scaldir* -bards, who would use mythical imagery for their poetic metaphors, the *kenningar*.⁵ This view has, however, been disputed by amongst others Mai Elisabeth Berg who sees the poems as purely literary constructions by Christian medieval poets.⁶ Yet Else Mundal argues that medieval poets used mythological material in a way that necessarily had to make sense to his contemporaries, who would be well-versed in the mythic cosmology.⁷ Margaret Clunies-Ross argues that Pagan ideas and mythology are proved to have survived as a living tradition several centuries after the establishment of Christianity in the North, a view that is also held by Gro Steinsland, who stresses the

⁴ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 16-19, Solli, 2002, p. 199, Mundal, 1974, p. 15-23

⁵ This summary is based on Holm-Olsen, 1995 p. 256-260

⁶ Berg, 2001, p. 15, 20, 26. Berg does believe that myth even still may be conveyed through the poems.

⁷ Mundal, 1994, p. 63-70

strength and reinforcement of the old religion during the period of conversion, when some of the poems were created.⁸ Scholars such as Einar Haugen and Gro Steinsland clearly state that genuine pre-Christian paganism may be detected in the poems.⁹

2.3: Heroic Poems

“In the traditional songs which form their only record of the past the Germans celebrate an earth-born god called Tuisto. His son Mannus is supposed to be the fountain head of their race and himself to have begotten three sons who gave their names to three groups of tribes.”¹⁰

Tacitus, 80 A.D.

The earliest proof of heroic poetry among Germanic peoples is given by the Roman historian, Tacitus, about the year 80 A.D., and by Jordanes in the 6th century. From the centuries that followed we have source material that shows how the Heroic Poetry of the Edda was a common Germanic heritage. The form is epical and dramatical, mostly presented in dialogues. The practical details are less important than the inner state of mind of the characters, their attitudes and their feelings. Changes and innovations in the oral transmissions have taken place before they were written down. The tales also existed in the form of legends, which may have formed the background of the poems, since the short, allusive style of the poems demands that the listeners possess knowledge of more detailed (prose) stories.

The poems of the two Helgis, which are rather young poems, clearly reflect the cultural milieu of the Viking Age –and are possibly of Danish origin. The compositions as we know them are probably not older than the 11th century, although the different parts are of different age.

Through prose interpolation, probably created by the directors of the manuscript, one of the Helgis is connected to Sigurd the Serpent-slayer through close kinship. The stories of Sigfried-Sigurd, however, came from the continent to Scandinavia during the 9th century, when they were already quite old, carrying legendary material from 5th century Europe.

⁸ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 18-19, Steinsland, 1998, p. 81-84

⁹ See ch. 2.7 and. ch. 3.3

¹⁰ Mattingly, 1970, p. 102

Of all the poems, *Gripispá* is probably the youngest, summing up the whole of Sigurd's story in a "prophecy".¹¹

2.4: Snorri's Edda

Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), a famous politician in his days, is today most famous for his great prose works, the *Heimskringla*, which contains the history of the Norwegian kings from their Pagan, divine origins and almost up to Snorri's own time, and of that work which has been called the "Younger Edda" or the "Snorri's Edda", which was composed some time between 1220 and 1225. It is both a thesis and a teaching book about the Old Norse art of poetry.¹² It is divided into a Prologue and three chapters; the *Gylfaginning*, the *Skáldskaparmál*, and the *Háttatal*. The prologue and the *Gylfaginning* cover Norse mythology, whereas the next two chapters are concerned with teaching the ancient forms of poetry. The *Skáldskaparmál* is also rich in mythology, since myths form the basis for the poetic metaphors (*kenningar*) that Snorri is teaching.¹³ The mythology that Snorri is relating is apparently founded on old poems but also on oral versions in prose. Clunies-Ross argues that both forms of mythology existed in pre-Christian times. The allusive nature of Old Norse poems indicates that they only relate "the tips of narrative icebergs" and that the audience would already be acquainted with the "main part of the story below the surface".¹⁴ This story is supposedly what Snorri is relating, making it possible for us to understand much more of the poems and what they are alluding to. Yet Snorri probably had many versions of the same stories, and it is likely that his accounts do not represent the "final", "real" version, but the "most complete of many" versions.¹⁵ That Snorri's presentation of the mythic material was shaped by his Christian world-view is visible, for example in the way he omits any explanations of known sacrificial myths such as Ódinn's hanging on the world-tree and the way the *völva*

¹¹ Holm-Olsen, 1995, p. 283-284, 288-299

¹² Clunies Ross, 1987, ch. I

¹³ Holm-Olsen, 1995, p. 211-220

¹⁴ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 25

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 30

Gullveig defies death. Many scholars have suggested that Snorri omitted these important mythical events because they were just too alien for his Christian understanding.¹⁶

2.5: Other Sources

There is a great wealth of written source material that scholars may use when studying Norse mythology. The different kinds of Icelandic sagas, the works of Saxo Grammaticus, contemporary literature from the continent, antique and Arab observations, as well as scaldic poetry may be used. For this thesis, I have focused mainly on the Eddas, and, out of concern with space will here refer to other material that has been directly applied when it seems necessary.

2.7: The Reliability of the Sources

We have already partially touched upon this subject in ch. 2.1 - 2.6. but we shall here quickly sum up our main standpoint. It is important to bear in mind that, as Gro Steinsland pointed out, the Norse source-material in general are myths worked upon as literature. A myth may express the ideology – that is, the thoughts and ideas that are dominant in society or in certain layers of society, of a class or of a group, its self-understanding and its world-understanding. One must, however, expect metamorphosis and transformations of various layers of ideas and be aware of individual, poetic creation. This means that the myth may have been removed from its original religious context. It is only through the revealing of and definition of **mythological models** in the sources, that one may have a hope of coming close to genuinely pagan beliefs. Through analysis of the texts, we may be able to detect the pre-Christian ideological contents of the literature, whereas a cultic frame of reference is far more difficult to reconstruct.¹⁷ As we shall see in ch. 3.2, most scholars, including Steinsland herself, have not refrained from interpreting the myths within a “cultic frame of reference” when the evidence seems to be sufficient. Through careful treatment, it appears possible to detect ideological models, structures and patterns within the poems. While some have seen the poems as actual “manuscripts” of recital or ritual drama, and thus of complete pagan origin, others have

¹⁶ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 32-33, Solli 2002, p. 159

¹⁷ Steinsland, 1991, p. 20

suggested remnants or patterns of practice and belief within the poetic creations. According to Eldar Heide, one could try and interpret myth through looking at the underlying structure in the myth behind the details. Heide reads mythology much like one would read a parable. In a parable, it is the structure that carries the meaning, not what fills out the structure. Variations in myths are thus no longer problematic. Heide builds his argument on the fact that this approach would be mindful of the rules for Norse poetic language. A most basic feature of Norse poetry is the endless variation in the expression of one thing or thought.¹⁸ My own perspective is a similar one to those of Heide and Steinsland; I aim at showing a recurring pattern in the poems that may reflect authentic pre-Christian myth and even cultic practice.

¹⁸ Heide, 1997, p. 92-93

3: Terminology and Previous Research

The *Poetic Edda* as a complete manuscript has a long history of research, and we will be scrutinizing several very different Eddic poems, each of which also has its very own history of research. Thus it will obviously be too much for this dissertation to cover the scholarly history of each poem and of the whole collection of poems. There will also be many details in the individual poems that we may not give sufficient attention. Some keywords only will be our focus of investigation: The offering of mead to the hero – theme, the theme of ritual initiation reflected in the myths, and the study of the Maiden-figure in her aspect as giantess, goddess and valkyrie. We will also touch upon some terms that will be used in this study.

3.1: Some terms: Initiation, Sacred Marriage, Shamanism and Mystery religions

“The term *initiation* in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a radical modification of the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to an ontological mutation of the existential condition. The novice emerges from his ordeal a totally different being.”¹⁹

Eliade and Adams divide **initiation** into three categories: “puberty rites”, which may also be known as “tribal initiation” or “initiation into an age group”, initiation into a secret society, and initiation connected to mystical vocation. The “puberty rites” introduce the novice into the world of spiritual and cultural values, making him or her a responsible member of society. The initiation requires some more or less dramatic trials: separation from the family, isolation from society and secret revelations. It often includes a ritual death, followed by a resurrection or rebirth. Rites of entrance into a secret society correspond with those of puberty or tribal initiation: seclusion, tortures, “death” and “resurrection”, the bestowal of a new name and the revelation of secret doctrines.

Initiatory death signifies the end of a state of being and the entrance into a new spiritual state. This procedure is patterned on the model revealed by the gods or mythical ancestors. Elders or priests, masters of initiation, supervise the rites and convey the

¹⁹ Eliade/Adams, 1987, VII, p. 225

revelations. As for shamans and medicine men, the initiation consists in ecstatic experiences through dreams, visions and trances; the instruction may be imparted by a master of initiation, but may also exclusively be imparted by spirits. Sometimes the initiation is public and includes rituals, but in many cases the novice is initiated without rituals: it happens in his or her dreams or ecstatic experiences²⁰. Jens Peter Schjødt has argued that the universal pattern detected in initiation ritual in fact may be detected in many other kinds of rituals. It is only when the person undergoing the rituals actually becomes someone or something else than he/she was before the ritual, is given a new position, a new social or religious role, that we may actually be speaking of a genuine initiation ritual.²¹

Sacred marriage, also called by its Greek term; *Hieros Gamos*, is the name of a mythical or ritual union between a god and a goddess, or between a divine and a human being; most especially a king and a goddess.²² In early city-states of the Middle East, the *Hieros Gamos* ritual was very common for thousands of years. *Hieros Gamos* continued as an unbroken tradition and was the central rite in religious life during the whole time-span of the state of Sumer, which lasted from 4500 B.C to about 1750 B.C, and, moreover, continued into the following Babylonian and Hebrew times, influencing Minoan and Greek rites as well, particularly within mystery cults. The Sumerian ritual was associated with a descent by the goddess to her sister in the Underworld, where she would become a corpse and then be resurrected. As Anita Hammer has shown, the preparations for the descent were identical with preparations for the marriage.²³ The model for the ritual was given in myths, and the ritual itself was performed on stage by a king and a priestess representing the goddess. The ritual represented the union of the king with the city goddess, being the visible counterpart of a celestial union. Kingship demanded a sacred foundation that could be provided only through the omnipotence of the Great Goddess²⁴.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 225-227

²¹ Schjødt, 1994, p. 114-115

²² Eliade/Adams, VI, p. 317, 319-320

²³ Hammer, 1999, p. 1

²⁴ Eliade/Adams, VI, p. 319-320

Sacred marriage in some form or another was also known in Scandinavia throughout the Bronze Age, shown in the rock carvings of that period. According to Camilla Helene Fari the contexts in which imagery of sexual intercourse from the Bronze Age are found strongly suggest a religious and cosmological framework. A great part of this imagery is clearly connected to a larger, official cult ruled by an elite. The sacred marriage imagery seems to belong to a time when society was becoming increasingly hierarchical. Since the Scandinavian Bronze Age society had an Indo-European basic structure where the elite maintained contact with the elites across Europe, Fari assumes that there must be a connection between the sacred marriage images of Scandinavia and the myths and rituals of sacred marriage in the Middle East. Fari speaks of a “basic myth” with great geographical extent that could have had some influence in Scandinavia. This basic myth was strongly connected to legitimation of the elite, to the peoples’ wish for fertility as well as philosophies around death and resurrection.²⁵ Comparative studies show that the Norse goddess Freyia shares all her important mythological attributes with the Sumerian goddess Ishtar/Innanna, and many with other Middle Eastern goddesses who also played a role in sacred marriage.²⁶ In my opinion, this strengthens Fari’s thesis of a strong connection between Middle Eastern and Scandinavian myth and cult.

In his study on fertility cults in connection to sacred kingship, Folke Ström clearly connects the Middle Eastern traditions with the Norse. Ström finds traces of a cult of the Great Goddess, intimately related to the “sacral king”. In his study of Old Norse texts and the official Uppsala-cult in pagan Sweden, he claims to find traces of ideas such as the king being identical with the god of fertility in his sexual relation to the Goddess and in his real or symbolic sacrificial death. Ström connects Ódinn’s self-sacrifice in the World Tree with such a descent to the underworld through sacrifice.²⁷

Recently, using the *Skírnismál* as a starting point, Gro Steinsland has shown that a myth of sacred marriage existed in the Norse society, and that it probably had its ritual counterparts. The *Hieros Gamos* myth was very important for the ideology of royal lines;

²⁵ Fari, 2003, p. 20-25

²⁶ Motz, 1993, p. 111

²⁷ Ström, 1954, p. 6-8, Ström argues that Ódinn shares many traits with a fertility god on p.62-69

the king or ruler represented a particular type of being different from others in that he was descended from a god and a giantess, representatives of cosmic polarity. Steinsland dates this form of *Hieros Gamos* back to the 5th century A.D, when royal lines and central rule achieved greater importance than before; when the ancient custom of sacrificing outside in groves and bogs was replaced by a cult much more closely linked to the royal houses. The rituals of initiation into kingship or rulership was connected to a death and resurrection symbolism, a revelation of esoteric knowledge, and culminated in sacred marriage, reflecting the ancient myth of the divine ancestral father and the giant ancestral mother.²⁸

Brit Solli is the last in a long row of scholars who have argued the existence of **shamanism** within the Norse society. That shamanism was known among the Norse-speaking population is clear: shamanism was a central practice among their close neighbours the Saami. Both sagas and laws testify to the close relationship between the Norse and the Saami populations. Norsemen would approach Saami shamans or sorcerers for help and even for teaching.²⁹ In the strictest sense of the term, a shaman is a religious practitioner operating within the tribes of Siberia, but, as Åke Hultkrantz has shown, its most particular features are to be found also in North America and in Scandinavia among the Saami.³⁰ Shamanism was also central in Greenland.³¹ According to Mircea Eliade, the shaman is primarily “the master of ecstasy” – an individual who succeeds in having mystical experiences in the form of a trance where the shaman’s soul leaves the body and flies to heaven or the underworlds. He becomes an expert in orienting himself in the unknown regions that he enters during ecstasy. The descents to the underworld are usually undertaken to find and bring back a sick person’s soul or to escort the soul of the deceased to its new dwellings. The principal function of the shaman is healing. The shaman may operate side by side with other religious experts such as sacrificial priests and with cults of the home.³² Eliade’s definition makes it possible to apply the term “shamanism” on several practices in other parts of the world, especially in Japan, Korea

²⁸ Steinsland, 1991; main theory of her thesis, Steinsland, 2000, p. 48 - 81

²⁹ Solli, 2002, p. 169-197

³⁰ Hultkrantz, 1978, p. 9-35

³¹ Demant Jacobsen, 1999, p. 1-17

³² Eliade, 2004, p. 4, Eliade/Adams, XIII, p. 202-207

and among the Sora tribes in India. Thus, shamanism may occur not only in nomadic hunting-gathering societies, but also in agricultural and “civilized” settings. As to our own subject, where the hero is always married to the supernatural Maiden, it is interesting to note that the concept of a “spirit bride” or “spirit husband” is very common, often obligatory, in many shamanistic traditions.³³

Eliade saw clear traces of shamanism in Norse mythology, particularly in the figures of Ódinn and Hermodr. But he, and many scholars after him, argued that there are no traces of real shamans, that is, human shamans, in the Norse sources.³⁴ In the descriptions of séances of *seidr*, Eliade found no soul journeys to heaven or the underworld, and found that the séances were concentrated mainly on divination, which he regarded as a “lower” art. Many have discussed whether *seidr* and *galdr* may have been part of a genuine Norse shamanistic practice. Strömbäck, Ström, Hedeager and Solli are all scholars who argue that they are just that. Steinsland also points out that there are obvious contact points between shamanism and *seidr*.³⁵ The problem seems to be one of definition and interpretation. Using Hultkrantz’s definition of shamanism as not only mastery of ecstatic journeys, but also as an art of calling the spirits, it does indeed seem possible to interpret some séances of *seidr*, *galdr*, as well as other arts such as *utisetá* (to sit outside in the night, often on a mound, or in a grove, to call the *vættir* - spirits) as a form of shamanism.³⁶ Demant Jacobsen is also among those who argue that shamanism is as much about “mastery over spirits” as about soul journeys.³⁷ Hultkrantz shows that, as opposed to Eliade’s understanding, divination is both important and highly regarded within shamanistic traditions, thus again opening up for a fresh understanding of many Norse divinatory practices.³⁸ Norse concepts of the soul included what Hultkrantz would call a “free-soul” – that is a soul which may leave the body and operate outside of it, often in the shape of an animal. Norse concepts of the *hugr*, *hamr*, *fylgja* and *hamingja*

³³ Eliade and Adams, XIII, p. 202-207

³⁴ Flood, 1999, p. 157-158, Eliade, 2004, p. 375, 380, 386-387

³⁵ Hedeager 1997, p. 117 Ström 1967, p. 114, Strömbäck, Solli, 2002, p. 130, Steinsland, 1997, p. 134

³⁶ Solli, 2002, p. 135-140. Hultkrantz, 1978 p. 20. Mundal, 1990, p. 311 also translates *vættir* as “spirits”.

³⁷ Demant Jacobsen, 1999, p. 5-7, 10, 15

³⁸ Solli, 2002, p. 137, Hultkrantz, 1992, p. 18-19

could all possibly fit into the “free-soul” concept that is so crucial to shamanism.³⁹ As for finding a (human) shaman in Norse society, the *völva* (f.pl. *völur*) is the latest and most obvious possible example. Her respected position and role in society and cult, as well as her art, *seidr*, are most compatible with other descriptions of shamans. Another candidate is the male *seidmadr*, who, at least in the written material, appears to have been more stigmatized than the female practitioner and often accused of unmanliness. Some have argued that *seidr* was a women's business, and that men practising it were regarded as unmanly simply because they operated in a feminine sphere of work.⁴⁰ However, the amount of *seidmennir* in the sources indicate that the practice was quite common also among men, and as Solli points out, even the highest god, Ódinn, practised it without shame. It is possible that his arts included aspects that the Christian writers could not accept of a man. As for other and more ancient titles that may have covered the office of a Norse shaman, Solli suggests the *thul* and the *eril*, basing herself on discussions of the

³⁹ The Norse soul-concepts seem compatible with the “free-soul” postulated by Åke Hultkrantz in his study of North American soul-concepts (and to the Saami). Hultkrantz defines it as the soul active outside the body. Originally, the free-soul was combined with anomalous states of consciousness, such as in dreams or visions, which is also seen in the Norse material, where a state of sleep or seclusion was connected to the wandering of the *hugr*. (Hultkrantz, 1953, p. 241-291). The Norse sources also show a belief in different kinds of souls. The *hugr*, meaning “will”, “thought”, “intent”, “desire”, and “love”, is the inner self of the human being. The *hugr* may separate itself from the body and move about on its own. When the soul moved outside of the body, it would take a *hamr*, a material shape, often an animal form. The ability to change *hamr* and travel on a *hamr*-journey (*fara i hamförum*) was the talent of the few and considered a capacity that you were born with. Such people were considered particularly versed in magic. The sagas tell of bards, warriors and *völur* (seeresses) who had this ability. The shape-changing was usually connected to a state of sleep or dreaming. The animal form of a human soul was also called *fylgja* (f.). Some *fylgjur* came in woman form instead of animal form (even if the owner of the soul was male). Else Mundal (1974) concludes that the woman *fylgja* was fundamentally different from the animal *fylgja*. While the animal *fylgja* represented a kind of “alter ego” to the person (and, according to Mundal, not a “free-soul”) the woman *fylgja* (*fylgjukona*) was considered a kind of guardian spirit, perhaps an ancestral mother, with her ultimate Ström (1985) has a different approach, sticking to the idea of the animal *fylgja* as “free-soul” and the woman *fylgja* as something related. Both agree that the *fylgjur* are connected to the *dísir*. Simek translates the *fylgjukona* as a “fetch”, although he adds that the literal meaning is “following spirit” or perhaps “skin”, “cover”. He defines it as the soul of people when it is separate from their bodies. The *fylgjur* may be identified with the personified fortune of a person, the *hamingja*. These are a kind of soul-like protective spirits. The word comes from *ham-gengja*, which originally referred to people who could let their *hamr* walk. The idea of the woman *fylgja* and *hamingja* is to my view connected to the idea of the *nornir* who follow each person through his or her life, as Snorri tells us in his *Gylfaginning*. They would appear to be intimately related to the collective of *dísir*. As Mundal has pointed out, the *fylgjur* are often called *dísir*, especially in poems. She believes that the woman *fylgjur* originated among the collective of female spirits or goddesses called the *dísir*, while the animal *fylgja* has a different origin.

⁴⁰ For example Ström, 1954, p. 60, Flood, 1999, p. 146-150, Eliade, 2004, p. 385

terms by scholars such as Ottar Grønvik and Bente Magnus.⁴¹ Later in this study, we will meet both a *thul* and a *jarl* – later version of *eril* - operating as what may be considered masters of initiation.

Näsström suggests that Ódinn's trials on the world tree are not necessarily reflections of shamanistic initiation; they might as well be compared to the initiatory trials of antique **mystery cults**. I do not agree that Ódinn's trials have more in common with such cults than to shamanism. In this study, however, I have come to see a certain similarity between the hero's trials and relations to the Maiden –supposedly the “Great Goddess”- and those of ancient mystery religions. Originally, “mysteries” denoted a religious manifestation that is not open to everyone, but required a special initiation. The word has later become a technical term for secret cults and ceremonies. It is particularly related to the Greco-Roman age and Near Eastern religions. The mysteries are special initiation ceremonies that are esoteric in character, involving the destiny of a deity and the communication of religious wisdom that enables the initiates to conquer death. Public processions and sacrifices, dances and music would frame the celebration, which was held in a closed room. The ceremony in itself was not open to the public. Since the mysteries were secret, we know very little of the actual content of the rituals, which centered on initiation. We may only deduce that the central theme was the linking of the initiate with the destiny of the divinity (very often a goddess), resulting in the hope of survival after death. Many ethnologists have seen the mysteries as remnants of ancient “rites of passage”. The oldest mystery cult is that of Demeter and Kore, known in Eleusis from the 7th century B.C until the destruction of its shrine by the Goths in 395 A.D. All classes, even slaves, were admitted to the cult. The initiates were considered blessed with life in the underworld, while others encountered evil. Other Greek mystery cults were that of Dionysos, open only to women, and that of Orpheus, who tried to retrieve his dead bride from the underworld. Ström has seen a similarity between the woman-oriented Ódinn-cult and the Dionysus-cult.⁴² In the Roman age, oriental cults such as those of Isis, Mithras and Cybele were adapted by Greco-Roman society and became very important as

⁴¹ Solli, 2002, p. 157-162, 216

⁴² Ström, 1954, p. 58-61

mystery cults. Cybele's cult involved the castration of male devotees. The cult of Isis was to become the most influential and important in late Antiquity. The initiate had to journey through the lower world and the upper world to be reborn by the grace of Isis, the Great Goddess.⁴³ **Mystical union** is the experience of union between a human being or soul and its divine object, considered the supreme stage of mystical experience. It is found as a concept in most religions, and in the Greek and Roman mystery religions it was central. A usual metaphor of mystical union is that of spiritual and heavenly marriage; a marriage of the soul with the deity. Mystical union may be understood as an experience of ecstasy. As with the shamans, who need to "die" in order to wander through the realms of death and spirits before being reborn, the "mystical death" and subsequent soul-journey is crucial in the stages leading to mystical union.⁴⁴

3.2: The Maiden With The Mead

"Is it so hard to imagine that the land beyond the sun is more beautiful than the sun itself, and that Gunnlöd may be sitting there on a golden throne, offering immortality to a mortal man? And this after he has experienced the horror of death and been born again, just as the earth is in *Völuspá*."

Svava Jacobsdottir

In his book *Lady With a Mead Cup*, Michael Enright shows how the offering of mead by a royal or noble lady was part of an ancient Germanic (and Celtic) ritual the purpose of which was to establish kingly authority and hierarchy within the king's warband. The queen or lady would enter the hall in a prescribed manner, offering mead to the king with a formal greeting and giving of advice. Most significant would be her official naming of the lord and master of the hall during the mead-offering. She would then proceed to the other warriors in the hall, according to their status, offering the same mead. The ritual, according to Enright, would be a communal bonding rite between the warriors, but at the same time an expression of lordship, hierarchy and rank. Through her role in the ritual, the lady would also act as a delegate for the king, interrogating visitors or newcomers

⁴³ Eliade and Adams, X, p. 230-238

⁴⁴ Eliade and Adams, X, p. 239-243

through her formal greeting, a greeting the visitor would be obliged to respond to, thus formally asserting his loyalty to the lord.⁴⁵

Communal drinking had in itself some aspects of a cultic act. Liquor was the medium through which one achieved ecstasy and thus communion with the supernatural. The practice was widespread among the Indo-European peoples and seems to have been closely related to the earliest rites of royal inauguration. It was also closely connected to the sacred making of oaths. While this has been well-known among scholars, according to Enright the importance of the role of the lady in the ritual has been neglected. Through texts, Enright shows how she was perceived very much in connection with the rite. She was the bearer of the consecrated liquor and the incitor of oaths. Her function was quite like the diplomat who constructs bonds of allegiance between the outsider and a king and his court -she was the instrument that sanctified the lord's status by naming him as such, by "serving him before all others and by causing each of his retainers to drink after him".⁴⁶ She sanctified the status of each warrior, made them all into a band of brothers which was also a perfectly hierarchical family. Her presence was essential, because the "binding rite" that she performed was her particular duty. Her cheering words and gifts "make a harsh life full of conflict and rivalry more bearable". At the same time she was a tool of her husband's dominance, since it was his power that she symbolized and acted out as his representative. The queen, through the mead-offering ritual, was a stabilizing influence.

Enright uses the mead-ritual as a starting point for a discussion of the queen's political role within the warband of Germanic warrior societies. Since we are dealing only with religion and mythology, Enright's thesis moves beyond our purposes. It is however useful to note that the idea of an offering of mead by a "gold-adorned" lady had its powerful traditions within innumerable Germanic societies from the earliest times up to the Viking Age. In ch. 8.5, we will further discuss Enright's works as he proceeds to showing, through an archaeological survey, that the lady with the mead cup was indeed an important and central character in Germanic societies, and that she might have originated as a prophetess or a priestess. As we shall see in this study, the mead-offering

⁴⁵ Enright, 1996, p. 1-18

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 22

women of the Poetic Edda are supernatural characters and the offering takes place somewhere apart from the world of humankind. Enright shows how the event had its counterpart in a common and ancient ritual in the “real world”. The rite, as Enright asserts, was, besides being a repeated ritual during important gatherings, essential in royal inauguration. In fact, the queen and her “prophetess” ancestor appear to have played an important political role in royal consecration.⁴⁷ As Steinsland has shown, the inauguration ritual in Norse society was also closely connected to a “sacred marriage rite”, whether real or symbolic. Thus, mead-offering rituals would in such cases be accompanied by sacred marriage.

Svava Jacobsdottir focuses on Gunnlöd’s serving of mead to Ódinn in the *Hávamál*, drawing a line between the magical drought of Gunnlöd and those of Irish legends where a divine lady or goddess personifying the land offers a crystal cup of red mead to a young king or hero before they go to bed together.⁴⁸ Such a connection between Norse and Irish / Celtic traditions is also made by Michael Enright. The lady is either named after the drink itself, such as “Intoxication”, or after her function as ruler of the land: “Sovereignty”. Only when the young hero accepts the drink and her holy embrace, is he fit to be king. This authority is granted through sacred marriage. In the Irish sources, the goddess is seated on a crystal chair, and the drink is emphasized for its (red) color and intoxicating effect. It is ladled out with a golden ladle and served from a golden cup. The hero has to swear an oath to the goddess. In the *Hávamál*, Gunnlöd is sitting on a golden chair, from where she ladles out the “precious mead” and serves it to Ódinn in a cup. The drink is called *litr* in st. 107, meaning “color”, a fact Jacobsdottir connects to the red color of the Irish mead. Ódinn has sworn a sacred ring-oath which Jacobsdottir interprets as an oath of marriage (which Ódinn breaks). The intoxicating effect of the drink is emphasized in the poem’s st. 13-14 and . According to Jacobsdottir, the drink is not called poetry mead, only the “precious mead”. (However, in st. 107, *Odrerir* is mentioned, the “Poetry Stir” which Snorri gives as name for one of Gunnlöd’s three cauldrons). After drinking it, Ódinn relates how he has obtained wisdom and become

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 24

⁴⁸ Jacobsdottir, 2002, p. 30-53

strengthened with the power of the Earth, bringing the mead up into the shrine of the Earth (st. 107-108). Jacobsdottir suggests that the Earth is Gunnlöd herself, personifying the land which the new king has married. The shrine of Earth may have had its ritual counterpart in a cave or grave-mound.⁴⁹ Jacobsdottir questions whether the Gunnlöd story was a Norse imitation or adaption of an Irish original, but concludes that it was part of the Norse tradition. *Hieros Gamos* was known in Norse society, and the theme of the sacred drink is also to be found in older Indo-European material. In the Norse sources, the mead shows up in several places: The mead served by the valkyries appears to have granted eternal life, and is in *Sigrdrifumál* also associated with “holy embraces”. The drink is also to be found in the name of the maiden Menglöd, whose embrace is also sought in the *Fjölsvinnsmál*. Instead of understanding her name as “*men-glöd*”, “Necklace Pleased”, as is the usual understanding, Jacobsdottir claims that it could be derived from Old English *mengan*, to mix, and *löd*, “invitation”. The sacred drink would then be implicit in her name. Jacobsdottir further connects the giantesses Gunnlöd, Gerdr, the valkyries and the maiden Menglöd through the wall of flame that surrounds them and their enchanted state. Jacobsdottir completes her essay by showing how the mead or ale from Norse and Celtic sources has its counterpart in Old Indian religions where Soma plays an important role as a drink of knowledge and immortality. The herb which was used to make the drink and which gave it its intoxicating power was the *soma*. In Sanskrit, the name for the drink was *madhu*, a word cognate with *mjödr* and *mead*.⁵⁰ “Holy embraces” was a part of the soma ritual, and in one myth, Indra drinks Soma from the lips of Apala, daughter of the sun. In another myth, an eagle called Garuda (“soma-thief”) gives the sacred drink to the gods. Garuda is really Vac, goddess of the voice, in disguise. The guardian of the Soma was said to be a serpent. The parallell to Snorri’s story of Ódinn’s theft of the mead of poetry while in the shape of a serpent and then an eagle is striking.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 40. Symbolic death and re-birth was part of king’s consecration in many such societies, and was associated with the Great Goddess. It was connected to the idea of immortality, which may be found also in the Norse material.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 48. This connection is also made by Näsström, 2001, p. 131, who speaks of a Norse Soma-tradition, and by Brockington, 1996, p. 16- Mead was used in libation sacrifice, something which is seen in the Sanskrit word *medha*; “sacrifice”.

3.3: Ritual and Initiation reflected in the Norse Myths

In his essay on the Edda as ritual, Einar Haugen criticizes philology students who over-emphasize the literary quality of the Norse poems.⁵¹ In their literary criticism, many have overlooked the religious values conveyed in the poetry. Students have criticized the poems for their repetitiousness, for their stereotyped forms, and the many lists of names have been considered dry and uninteresting. This, according to Haugen, is because these students have failed to penetrate behind the poems to the religious faith of those who composed and performed them. The value of formulaic repetition in creating a mood has been neglected. The “shamanic ecstasy that runs through these poems from one end to the other, the magic blessings that brought power...”⁵² has not been appreciated. Consequently, Haugen proposes that the high degree of performance-oriented quality in the poems must mean that we are close to having something like a text for cultic occasions in the poems of the Poetic Edda. The *Skirnismál*, for example, may very well be seen as a ritual drama promoting fertility.

The idea of the texts of the Edda as reflecting actual ritual is doubtful, as we saw in ch. 2.1, 2.2, and 2.7. Folke Ström believes that the original connection (which he assumes existed) between myth and cultic ritual has become weakened up to the point of complete dissolution where the myth takes its own life, making way for a more literary form. What may have begun as a cultic text is gradually turned into legend and saga. Yet in some instances, especially when the myth survives as a divine saga or legend, it may be possible to find the original pattern of cultic drama, a core of ritual, timeless reality. Ström uses Ódinn’s self-sacrifice on the World Tree as an example of what he sees as a ritual where the king plays the role of the fertility god who dies and is resurrected, connected to a *hieros gamos* ritual with the Great Goddess.⁵³

The stanzas about Ódinn’s trials on the world tree, where he hangs, stabbed, without eating or drinking for nine days, before picking up the sacred knowledge of the runes, has

⁵¹ Haugen, 1983, p. 3-21

⁵² Ibid, p. 21

⁵³ Ström, 1954, p. 9

caught the attention of many scholars from an early time. Eliade saw the trial as strikingly reminiscent of Siberian shamans' initiatory trials on the World Tree.⁵⁴ Solli argues the same thing, and proceeds to suggest that many so called sacrifices by hanging may have been quite common as a ritual of initiation: the initiate would not be actually strangled, but hung up in a tree without food or drink for several days leading to the necessary trance state induced by pain and suffering which is so common in shamanistic practice. Following the argument of Ottar Grønvik, she suggests that the one hanging in the tree in *Hávamál* st.138-139 is not actually Ódinn but a *thul* who identifies himself with the destiny of the god.⁵⁵ Jere Fleck suggested that Ódinn's trials during his quest for wisdom may very well reflect a kind of ascetic mortification of the flesh for the sake of inducing visions of the unknown, a widely spread practice in many religions.⁵⁶ Britt Mari Näsström sees the trials of Ódinn hanging on the world tree within the context of initiation into a religious office – an initiation which reminds her more of Hellenistic mystery-religions than of shamanism.⁵⁷ Whatever is our opinion about this subject, we may get from this discussion the idea of how pagan ritual and religion is being perceived by scholars in the history of religions as a historical reality hiding behind the medieval texts.

In her major work about Norse ritual and sacrifice, Näsström touches upon the theme of ritual reflected in myths several times.⁵⁸ In general, her view seems to be that myths which on the surface tell quite wild, romantic or funny tales may in reality reflect actual ritual.⁵⁹ She shows how Eddic poems like the *Hymiskvida* in its entirety deals with ritual eating and drinking, and how the scaldic poem *Haustlong* is really describing an act of sacrifice.⁶⁰ In the Saga of Hrolf Kraki, she singles out elements of ritual initiation into manhood or a secret society.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Eliade, 2004, p. 379-384

⁵⁵ Solli, 2002, p. 154-162

⁵⁶ Haugen, 1983, p. 20

⁵⁷ Näsström, 2001, p.167-172

⁵⁸ Näsström, 2001

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 98

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 125-126

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 117-118

Näsström appears to be reflecting a general tendency among scholars of Norse mythology when she sees remnants of religious practice within the myths, although most are careful about suggesting that the poems as we know them are actual “manuscripts” for ritual drama. As Holm-Olsen pointed out (see ch. 2.1) it is difficult to decide the age and authenticity of the poems. However, many are those who have seen at least reflections of the practices and concepts of ritual in the Edda. Jan de Vries suggested that the myth of Balder’s murder was describing an initiation rite for a young warrior. He points out that death (and resurrection) is part of the trials of initiation.⁶² Kaaren Grimstad and Edith Marold⁶³ as well as Lotte Motz⁶⁴ point to the dwarf Regínn’s role as a master of initiation for the young hero Sigurdr, while Grimstad adds the fact that in the Sigurd-story there are several “elder” figures who also act in this fashion. Jens Peter Schødtt also places the story of Sigurdr within the framework of a typical initiation ritual where the hero goes through trials that lead to numinous revelations and a new position in society afterwards.⁶⁵ In the Eddic poem *Völundarkvida*, Grimstad sees a “double initiation”: first, the one undergone by the elf smith Völundr, suffering captivity, mutilation, and symbolic death before he is able to soar freely in the air, reborn with increased powers; secondly, he acts as the master of initiation to the kings’ sons. Slaying and dismemberment, Grimstad states, are integral parts in both shamanic and warrior cult initiations⁶⁶.

Gro Steinsland has argued that myths like the *Skírnismál* and the *Hyndluljóð*, both of which will be discussed in this work, reflect an ideology of “sacred” kingship based on the heritage of a sacred marriage between a god and a giantess. Since her theories have met with support and her ideas have been elaborated on the basis of more research, she has lately argued that both poems may very well reflect rituals of initiation into kingship through trials in the other world or world of the dead, culminating in sacred marriage.⁶⁷ In this context, Solli, who otherwise argues for shamanism, suggests that even kings or chiefs may have had to undergo “shamanistic” hanging rituals such as that of the king in *Gautreks saga* who (unsuccessfully) tried to let himself be symbolically hanged and

⁶² Näsström, 2001, p. 153 (De Vries, 1955, p. 44 , Arkiv för Nordisk filologi 70: *Der Mythos von Balders Tod*)

⁶³ Grimstad, 1983, p. 187-205

⁶⁴ Motz, 1983, p. 96

⁶⁵ Schjødtt, 1994, p. 113-123

⁶⁶ Grimstad, 1983, p. 203

⁶⁷ Steinsland, 1991, Steinsland, 2000, p. 72-73

stabbed. Solli supports her argument with the old Nordic concept of the *widu-hundaR* – “the chief in the tree”.⁶⁸ On comparing the myth of Gunnlöd and Ódinn with Irish and Indian sources, Svava Jacobsdottir decides that the myth must be treating the ritual initiation of a king through sacred marriage. Studying the details of the myth, she tries to form a picture of the ritual: It must have happened underground, and after trials of hardship, the young initiate is finally met by the representatives of the otherworld, a lady on a golden chair who grants him the holy drink and her holy embrace after he has sworn a most sacred ring-oath. The trials take place in the presence of his masters of initiation. Finally, Jacobsdottir suggests that the myth encompasses more than just trials of kingship, since the realm of Gunnlöd and the drink she conveys may appear to offer an alternative to death.⁶⁹

Einar Haugen criticized the strong focus upon kingship initiation among the scholars of the Edda. Although many poems may reflect the initiation of kings, to see them only in the light of kingship ritual is, according to Haugen, to restrict the myths too severely. Haugen chooses to see the myths rather as part of the whole ceremonial pattern of Germanic religion in which the king-priest or sacred magician acts out the role of the gods he tells about. He points out that there is even a word for this kind of practitioner: the *thul*, meaning “chanter” (from *thylja* –to “chant”) – a chanter, a reciter of numinous wisdom, a sage or a poet.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Solli, 2002, p. 162

⁶⁹ Jacobsdottir, 2002, p. 30-51

⁷⁰ The *thul* is found in the Poetic Edda as the reciter in the *Hávamál* st. 111, as a title for the Giant Vaftrhúdnir (“an old thul”), for the dwarf Regínn (“a hoary thul”), and for Ódinn (the “master-thul” in *Hávamál* st. 80, st. 142.) Haugen, 1983, p. 20

3.4: The Great Goddess

Else Mundal has put forth the question of why the majority of Norse goddesses known from Snorri and the poets appear invisible in myth and cult. One common explanation has been that most of the goddess-names were poetic inventions. The poets supposedly needed goddess-names to use in their poetic metaphors for women. It is true that poets used the names of goddesses to describe women, but, as Mundal argues, “names of goddesses could not function as a basic word in *kenningar* if they did not give associations to goddesses people knew beforehand.”⁷¹

The poetic metaphors worked because they alluded to already known mythology. Mundal’s explanation of the numerous named, but faded goddesses, is that female deities would mostly be worshipped as a collective. This “fact may partly explains why the individual goddess –with the exception of Freyia - disappears as an individual...”⁷² Another, complementing explanation is that the multitude of single, non-married goddesses, who far outnumber the male gods, did not fit into the patriarchal family structure that Snorri and his contemporaries tried to impose on the pagan gods. Thirdly, Mundal argues that “concepts of one individual goddess and the female collective merge into one another. There is no sharp division between the *dís* (sg.) and the *dísir* (pl).”⁷³ Mundal draws the line between the *dís-dísir* and the norns, the valkyries, and the *fylgjur*, concluding that where the female deities are concerned, the conceptions of the individual and the collective merge together. To talk about “lower female deities” when talking about the collectives of norns, valkyries, *fylgjur* and *dísir* is useless seen in this light: they are as important in the cult as the individual deity, and are not separable from them. Even the division between human and divine becomes blurred in the case of females: the valkyries may be described almost as humanbeings, the *vólur* exist both as real women and as mythical beings, and even the word *gydja* means both “priestess” and “goddess”. Mundal suggests that what we are seeing in the collective of female deities are hypostases of the greater, individual goddesses, such as Freyia and Frigg. And, she argues, “if we

⁷¹ Mundal, 1990, p. 305

⁷² Ibid p. 300

⁷³ Ibid, p. 312

have hypostases, we will get more goddesses out of one, and the last one will be as “real” as the first one.”⁷⁴

Britt Mari Näsström defines a Great Goddess as the counterpart of a male high God: she takes a dominating position, she is independent, rules over fate, and is worshipped by both men and women. She often appears with many names and shapes, her character is ambivalent, a feature which often splits her into several beings. She is connected to the earth, but may also be a goddess of heaven. Her cult is widespread and official.⁷⁵

The idea of “Mother Earth” as the Great Goddess may be limiting. As Jacobsdottir intervenes, the goddess may be equally connected to heaven and sun, not the least in Norse mythology, where the connection of sunlight, brightness and the goddess is very common.⁷⁶ I wish to add that the sun in the Norse language is feminine, and in the myths, the sun is continually referred to as a woman or a goddess, sister of the (male) moon. This is a fact which appears to have been ignored by many scholars, who sometimes speak of a Norse Sun God, supposedly Freyr, although there is no reference to a male sun anywhere in the sources.⁷⁷ As we shall see, the Maiden, who on some level may represent the land to whom the king must marry, is also associated with brightness and shine, and as a valkyrie, her sphere is air and sea. As a giantess, however, she emerges from the depths of the earth as do Gunnlöd, Gerdr, Fenja and Menja.

Folke Ström⁷⁸ and Näsström have both in their own ways expressed the idea of a Great Goddess behind the many shapes and names of female characters that appear in Norse mythology. Ström presents the *dísir* as the designation given to a collective of female deities without known individual names. As Mundal showed (above), these names may be the ones reflected in poetry. The *dísir* were the objects of widespread cults of ancient origin, and they were closely connected to Freyia, the *Vanadís*. The idea of one Great *Dís* becomes clear from the name of the central hall of the *dísablót* (the sacrifice to the *dísir*); the *Disarsalinn*. *Dísar* here is a genitive sg. which means that we are dealing with the hall

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 304

⁷⁵ Näsström, 1998, p. 79

⁷⁶ Jacobsdottir, 2002, p. 43

⁷⁷ For example Dronke, 1997, p. 396-397, Turville-Petre, 1975, p.174

⁷⁸ Ström, 1985, and 1954

of the one (great) *Dís* rather than the hall of the many *dísir* who received sacrifice at this important celebration. Ström suggests that it must be Freyia who hides behind the title, and is supported by Näsström, who points out that from the nameless collective of *dísir*, one great *dís*, one Great Goddess, emerges.⁷⁹

The *dísir* have their etymological origin from old Indian: *Dhisanâ*, a goddess who could take many shapes, then called *dhisanas*. They were goddesses of wealth and happiness, and they took care of the sacred drink, Soma, the drink of immortality.⁸⁰

In Norse mythology, the lines between the *dísir*, the *valkyrior*, the *fylgjur*, and the *nornir*, are blurred; much points to a common origin, or that the different designations just specify the kind of *dís* that we are dealing with. *Dísir* were, in general, the guardian spirits of the clans, and appear to have been particularly close to the head of the clan. The *dísir* called *valkyrior* were the poetical expressions of the warrior ideal of the Viking ages, with their warlike appearance. Sometimes, the *dísir* of the clan were called *fylgjur*, which means “followers”.⁸¹ It has been discussed whether woman-*fylgja* could represent the soul of a person (see ch. 3.1). A person could have a woman *fylgja* or an animal *fylgja*, a form of soul that could travel independently of the body, as could the *hugr* (“will”, “thought”, “soul”) and the *hamingja* (fate, fortune).⁸² In their function as fate-deciding powers, the *dísir* were called *nornir*, who were thought to be present at a child’s birth to give it a name and decide its fate.⁸³

As Ström and Näsström suggested, the goddess Freyia may be the head of all the different *dísir*, indeed, she may be the one Great *Dís* hiding behind the *dís* of the *Disarsalinn*. Ström believes, for example, that the giantess Skadi – *öndurdís* - is the winter-aspect of Freyia the goddess - *vanadís*.⁸⁴ In her work on the Great Goddess of the North, Näsström identifies Freyia in the same manner, and sees Freyia, as meaning only “Lady”, hiding behind most of the feminine deities in the mythology, whose names only denote the functions she plays in the myth, or refer to a local name for the Lady. Many of the goddesses in the myth may be identified with Freyia through their character and their

⁷⁹ Ström, 1997, p. 192-193, Näsström, 1998, p. 156

⁸⁰ Näsström, 1998, p. 146, Ström, p. 192

⁸¹ Ström, 1997, p. 194-196

⁸² Ibid, p. 206

⁸³ Ibid, p. 201

⁸⁴ Ström, 1954, p. 6

functions, and Freyia may also be recognized as the Great Valkyrie, the Great Dís, and even the great old norn, Urdr.⁸⁵ The only female character whom Näsström does not identify Freyia with are the giantesses. They are seen as something completely different. Näsström even states that the giants are “only evil” (“bare onskapsfulle”).⁸⁶ She also believes that the after-death realm of Freyia is completely separated from that of the giantess Hel.⁸⁷ However, without hesitating, both Ström and Näsström include the giantesses Gerdr and Skadi among the goddesses, showing how Freyia may hide behind even these figures.⁸⁸

Gro Steinsland has shown that giantesses have had an important and positive role in the mythology. They played the part of ancestral mothers to the royal lines, contributing primeval creativity and power where the divine ancestral father contributed law and order. Besides, giants, particularly giantesses such as Skadi and the collective of giantesses known as the *mörnir*, are now proven to have received sacrifice and had their own shrines and cults. This is not, according to Steinsland, because the giantesses were a kind of old, important goddesses who had become “lesser” with time. On the contrary, the giant stock is different from the gods, their polar opposites. Nonetheless, they were important and powerful cosmic characters, and it would be “...remarkable if Norse tradition should miss any ritual dealing with powers on whom the whole of existence finally depended. The giants are as necessary to the world as the gods are.”⁸⁹ It is exactly from this polar opposition between god and giantess that the very power of the sacred marriage derives.⁹⁰ Since I have detected “Maiden-mythology” in poems concerning both obvious giantesses, goddesses, and valkyries, I find Steinsland’s theory of extreme opposition somewhat problematic. The Maiden, whom we shall identify as the Great Goddess, does exist both in giant and divine form. However, there is a remarkable difference between the role played by the giantess Maiden and the goddess Maiden: The giantess is related to the gods only, the goddess-valkyrie deals with human heroes. I think

⁸⁵ Näsström, 1998, p. 177, p.154-178

⁸⁶ Näsström, 2001, p. 13

⁸⁷ Näsström, 1998, p. 176-177

⁸⁸ Näsström, 1998, p. 85, 112, 114, 122, 139-141, Ström, 1954, p. 6

⁸⁹ Steinsland, 1986, p. 212-220

⁹⁰ Steinsland, 1991, p. 268-269, p. 278-282, p. 127-129

this is an important difference which I will touch upon in the chapters concerning the “ogress-Maiden-opposition”, without hoping to reach as yet to the absolute depth of this puzzling problem.

4: Gunnlöd, Gerdr and the Giantesses

In this chapter we shall explore the two main myths of the Poetic Edda where a giantess plays the role of serving the mead to the hero; that of Gunnlöd as found in the *Hávamál* (and in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*) as well as the myth of Gerdr in the *Skirnismál*. In the two poems, a god, Ódinn and Freyr respectively, plays the hero's role of seeking the giantess with the mead, as opposed to the other poems of this study where the heroes are young men and the Maiden has, perhaps significantly, become a goddess or a valkyrie. Much research has been done on all these poems, and within the space of this work I have little leisure to explore all their implications: we will be concentrating on the common structural elements in the poems, in order to detect a common mythical concept and a ritual structure behind the different poetic expressions.

4.1: Giantesses in the Realms of Death

The *jotnir* (sg.m.*jotunn*) are always translated into English as “giants”, while the female, the *gygjar* (sg.f.*gygr*) are called “giantesses”. However, the actual significance of the word *jotunn* seems to be “eater”, “devourer”.⁹¹ The “giants” are the primeval beings, existing before the gods and the ordered world, and are, ultimately, their destroyers. Giantesses operate as mistresses of the realms of death: Hel rules in *Niflheim* – the “misty World”⁹² where most dead souls have to go – even the soul of the god Balder, for whom tables are decked and mead brewed – but hidden - in that dark realm.⁹³ Hel's hall is surrounded by tall gates that must not be touched by the living. *Niflheim* is filled with poisonous rivers, with serpents and wolves, animals associated with other giantesses like *Hyrrokkin*, *Skadi*, *Hyndla* and the wolf-riding, serpent-handling, death-declaring *fylgja* that appears in the poem of Helgi Hjörvardsson. Hel's brothers are the World Serpent, who lays coiled around the ordered world (*Midgardr*,) and the wolf *Fenrir* who is destined to devour Ódinn during *Ragnarrök*. *Niflheim* lies to the icy north of the world,

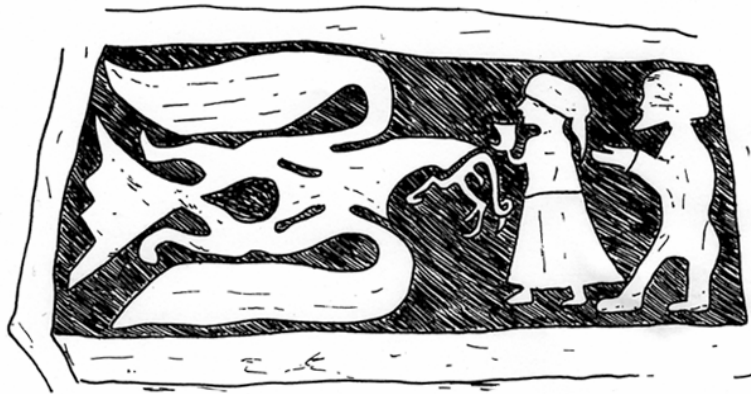
⁹¹ Haugen, 1983, p. 18, Simek, 1996, p. 180

⁹² Simek, 1996, p. 232; translates *Niflheim* to “Dark World” and *Niflhel* to “Dark Hel”, although he admits that the words are derived from OE *nifol* –darl and Latin *nebulae*; “fog”, “mist”. In *Norrøn Ordbok*, the translation is “tåkeheim”, that is, “misty world”, my preferred interpretation, although the association with the realm and darkness is shown through the myths of Hermodr and in *Baldrs draumar*.

⁹³ *Baldrs Draumar*, st. 7

where there is also a giant in eagle's disguise whose name is *Hræsvelgr*, “The Corpse-Swallower”.⁹⁴ He is the origin of the winds of the world. The realm lies at one of the roots of the world tree where there is a well infested by serpents, from which many of the world's rivers originate. Hel is said to have power over nine worlds. According to Snorri, Hel's face is half pink as life, and half blue as death. Another realm of death is below the sea, where *Rán* – “robbery”⁹⁵ - dwells, catching those who drown in her net. She has nine daughters, who are often associated with the waves. Through poetic metaphors they are also connected to gold and poetry. *Rán's* realm is also associated with mead, cauldrons and decked tables, as we see in the beginning of the *Skáldskaparmál*. Steinsland has shown how the experience of death often is depicted as something of an erotic feast or even a wedding to the mistresses of death.⁹⁶

4.2: GUNNLÖD AND THE MEAD OF POETRY



Gotland, Sweden

Gunnlöd means “Invitation to Battle”, a name which according to Simek would be rather more typical for a valkyrie than for a giantess, suitable for the figure of the valkyrie who hands out mead.⁹⁷ The oldest written version of the story is to be found in the *Hávamál* poem st. 104-110, where Ódinn himself tells the story of his conquest. In the stanzas, which may be read in their entirety in App.I, Ódinn tells of how he entered the hall of the “old giant” – Suttungr - speaking so well for himself that he saved his life in that alien

⁹⁴ Simek, 1996, p.158

⁹⁵ Simek, 1996, p. 260

⁹⁶ Steinsland, 1992, p. 321-322

⁹⁷ Simek, 1996, p. 124-125

realm. A lady sitting on a golden throne offers him “a precious drink of mead”. The lady is Gunnlöð, Suttungr’s daughter, and her appearance is queen-like. We learn that Ódinn had sworn a sacred ring-oath before he had relations with her. The speaking in the hall of the maiden’s father, the oath, the ritual offering of mead and the subsequent embrace between the god and the giantess all seem to indicate a wedding.⁹⁸ Gunnlöð proceeds to help Ódinn in his effort to get out of the hall of the giants, in fact, he admits that he would not have been able to escape without her help. Gnawing himself out through the mountain “with the mouth of Rati”, risking his head between paths of giants, Ódinn manages to return up to “Earth’s old shrine”, bringing with him the drink that Gunnlöð gave him, *Odrerir*, or “Poetry Stir”. Ódinn concludes the story by naming himself Harm-Doer and oath-breaker, for he left Gunnlöð behind, weeping, and he stole the mead by treason. He also tells how the frost-ogres ask themselves whether he had died by Suttungr’s hands or had “come among the gods”.

St. 107 identifies the precious mead as *Odrerir*, a cauldron of mead whose history Snorri explains in *Skáldskaparmál*. Snorri also asserts that it was this mead that Gunnlöð gave to Ódinn. More to the point, *Odrerir* was, according to Snorri, the biggest one of the three cauldrons in which the mead was kept. Thus we have two sources that identify Gunnlöð’s precious mead with the “mead of poetry”. It is a mead that is the essence of the primordial truce between the two tribes of gods, the *Aesir* and the *Vanir*. The mead contains divine wisdom and all the intelligence of the world. Anyone drinking it will become a sage and a great poet.⁹⁹ In Snorri’s version, a great point is made out of the fact that Ódinn manages to escape with the mead inside of himself, to be held forever after in the divine realm of *Àsgard*. The *Hávamál* version asserts that, because of his troubles and his relation to Gunnlöð, Ódinn could now bring the mead “up” into the shrine of Earth.

Apparently, most scholars consider the trials of Ódinn on the world tree as something completely separate from his sacred marriage to Gunnlöð.¹⁰⁰ However, *Odrerir* does indeed appear in a different set of *Hávamál* stanzas which, to my view, may connect the

⁹⁸ See ch. 3.2

⁹⁹ Faulkes, 1987, p. 62-64.

¹⁰⁰ I have not been able to find anyone else who makes this connection.

two events. St. 138-139 (See App.II) tells the tale of how Ódinn (or a *thul* identifying himself with Ódinn, see ch.3.1) hangs in a wind-swept tree for nine whole nights, stabbed, thirsting and starving. He is given to Ódinn, he is giving “self to himself”, and, peering down, he has a vision: screaming, he takes the runes “up”, falling backwards. As mentioned in ch. 3.1 and 3.3, Ódinn’s trials on the World Tree is generally understood as a ritual of initiation. But as Schjødt pointed out (ch. 3.1), the initiation is only complete when the result is that the initiate achieves a new position, status or spiritual level. Thus the st. 138-139 lose their meaning without the st. 141 which tells of how Ódinn became a sage after his trials. In between we have st. 140: explaining how Ódinn learns nine powerful charms from a giant, his maternal uncle, and, in the same breath, has a drink of precious mead, ladled out from *Odrerir*. Only then he learns to grow, be wise, and be eloquent.¹⁰¹ To read the trials of Ódinn as reflecting a ritual of initiation, as most scholars do, it is necessary to consider all the stanzas from his trials to the result, that is, st. 138 to st. 141. St. 140 makes it clear that the precious mead, *Odrerir*, and the learning of *galdr* was part of the same ritual as the one where Ódinn hangs on a tree. *Odrerir* is certainly connected to Gunnlöd’s mead, as testified by Snorri and by *Hávamál* st. 107.

Snorri does not mention Ódinn’s sacrifice in his version of the Gunnlöd story, however, he does not mention that important event anywhere. As we saw in ch. 2.4, violent ritual sacrifice, even if symbolic, may simply have been too incomprehensible, too alien or even too pagan for him to try and explain. Indeed, one does not need Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál* version to form a complete picture of one version of the story independently. The connection between st. 140 and st. 107 through the name of the mead that Ódinn drinks, *Odrerir*, convinces me that there is a strong connection between Ódinn’s self-sacrifice not only with the discovery of the sacred runes, but also with the learning of charms from an old giant and the ritual drinking and marriage with a lady of the other world.

¹⁰¹ See appendix II for the original text

4.3: An Underlying Structure of Themes

Assuming that the two sets of stanzas from the *Hávamál* that we have discussed are indeed connected through the mead-theme, we may form an image of at least one version of the story, and we may detect an underlying structure:

First, we have what I would call a “vision quest- theme”. Ódinn, or the one trying to resemble him, undergoes trials of hardship, pain and fasting in order to achieve a vision. Second, we have a “vision-theme”. The I-person “peers down” and picks up sacred knowledge. Third, we have a “descending- theme”: Our hero descends into the world within the mountains, filled with the paths of otherworldly creatures, and ruled by giants, a deadly realm where one risks one’s head. Only cleverness (the use of many words, eloquence), may save the life of the one who descends. My reason for the use of the word “descend” is because I believe there is reason to assume that the realm in question is a kind of Underworld or, indeed, another image of the world of the dead. I will discuss this below. Fourth, we have a “trial-theme”. Ódinn has to face an old, dangerous giant, whether it be Suttungr, Gunnlöd’s father, or Bolthorn, his own maternal uncle, who will only receive him and teach him if he shows himself eloquent and smart enough. After the learning of nine spell-songs, we are led over to the fifth theme, the “Maiden-theme”, which is where the culmination of the hero’s trials takes place: his meeting with the queen-like Maiden on her golden throne, her offering of the “precious drink”, the “Poetry Stir”, and her own soul, heart and embrace. The result of the trials and the union with the Maiden-figure is a knowledge of runes, of charms, and the escape from that deadly realm which surrounds the Maiden. He also becomes exceedingly wise and eloquent. The betrayal-theme in the story of Ódinn and Gunnlöd is very interesting but there is no space to discuss it to any extent in this study.

4.4: The Maiden and her Kin: A Realm of Death?

Gunnlöð is seated, queen-like, on a golden throne. She dwells within a place called *Hnitbjörg* –the “Beating Rock”.¹⁰² And she is a guardian. *Hnitbjörg* is usually understood to be a mountain, since *björg* means “layers of rock”¹⁰³. Gunnlöð stays within the rock-layers. This is in accordance with her role as a giantess, since giantesses are frequently related to rock, stone and mountain. The giantess Hyndla, for example, is said to live in a rock cave.¹⁰⁴ The guardian role is shared with other giantesses: Móðguðr –“Furious Battle”¹⁰⁵ - is the guardian of the river *Gioll* –“Loud Noise” and the bridge *Gjallarbru* – the “Resounding Bridge”¹⁰⁶ - which lead the way to Hel. In the *Helreidr Brynhildar* we see how the entry into Hel’s realm is guarded by an ogress. Is Gunnlöð’s dwelling also a death-realm?

The “Eagle-proof”

Gunnlöð is the daughter of giants. In Snorri’s version of the story of Óðinn and Gunnlöð, her father, Suttungr, appears as a giant in eagle’s disguise, much like *Hræsvelgr*. We already mentioned this “Corpse-Swallower” in ch. 4.1, and find the image of death as a giant-eagle worth scrutinizing, especially since it will show up again in the heroic poems of chapter 6. The eagle is mentioned as the origin of all winds in Óðinn’s ninth question in the poem *Vafþrúdnismál*, st. 36 and 37 (see App.III). Snorri gives further information about “Corpse-Swallower”:

“At the northernmost end of heaven there sits a giant called Hræsvelgr. He has eagle form. From his wings they say wind comes over all men.”¹⁰⁷

Snorri’s addition is valuable because it locates *Hræsvelgr*’s residence in the northern end of heaven. The north is the direction of *Niflheim* and Hel, the world of the dead. In the *Gylfaginning*, Snorri makes *Niflheim* the opposite part of the south in the primeval universe, which, logically, must be to the north¹⁰⁸. In the *Skáldskaparmál*, Hermodr, who

¹⁰² Simek, 1996, p. 154

¹⁰³ *Norrøn Ordbok*

¹⁰⁴ *Hyndluljóð*, st. 1

¹⁰⁵ Simek, 1996, p. 220

¹⁰⁶ Simek, 1996, p. 111

¹⁰⁷ Faulkes, 1987, p. 20

¹⁰⁸ Faulkes, 1987, p. 9, 10

is riding to Hel, has to go “north and down”¹⁰⁹. The *Voluspá* declares that the hall on “Corpse-beach” has doors looking to the north, and this is where the great serpent Nidhoggr sucks the bodies of the dead.¹¹⁰ The eagle Corpse-Swallower, then, must belong to *Niflheim*, the Misty World of Hel, where, perhaps, as his name indicates, he tears at corpses in the same manner as the serpent *Nidhoggr* and the other uncountable serpents (such as *Svafnir*) by the well, *Hvergelmir*, at the root of *Yggdrasil* the World Tree.

Another great eagle connected to *Yggdrasil* and the heavens, is the unnamed eagle sitting in the branches of the ash. It is exceedingly wise, yet it keeps an ongoing quarrel with the serpent *Nidhoggr*.¹¹¹ Between its eyes sits a hawk called *Vedrfolnir* – “Wind-Diminisher”,¹¹² apparently the wind-creating eagle’s anti-thesis sitting right in the middle of its own eyes. Are we, in the eagle of the World Tree, perhaps seeing yet another image of our wind-creating *Hræsvelgr*?

Another giant in eagle’s disguise is Thiazi, father of Skadi, a giantess turned goddess through marriage among the *Æsir*. In the the scaldic poem *Haustlög* by Thiodolfr af Kvinir, who lived around the year 900 A.D., Thiazi captures the goddess Idunn.¹¹³ Snorri relates the poem and gives a summary of the story in the *Skáldskaparmál*.¹¹⁴ Idunn is the goddess “who knows the age-cure of the *Æsir*”, that is, she is the keeper of the apples that give the gods eternal youth. When Thiazi takes her away, the gods grow old and feeble, and realize that they will die unless Idunn is brought back from the giant world. Eventually, wearing a falcon’s disguise, Loki manages to bring her back. He is followed by Thiazi in the shape of an eagle. The flight in bird’s disguise with a stolen (or rather retrieved) treasure from the giant in eagle’s disguise is quite reminiscent of Ódinn’s flight from Suttungr in eagle’s shape.

¹⁰⁹ Faulkes, 1987, p. 50

¹¹⁰ *Voluspá*, st. 38, 39

¹¹¹ Faulkes, 1987, p. 18

¹¹² From *vedr*, n.: “wind, stormy weather”, and *folna*, “go pale, go dry, go less (*folnan*, f., “diminishing”), *Norrøn Ordbok*

¹¹³ *Haustlög*, st. 2-13 (Jónsson, 1912)

¹¹⁴ Faulkes, 1987, p.59-61, 86-88

The giant's association with death seems to me obvious: when offered a piece of the holy meal, it takes the whole steak. It flies off with Loki who is mysteriously stuck to it when first daring to touch it. The flight, we realize, means the death of Loki, unless he brings Idunn to the giant's world. Yet his escape is only temporary; the theft of Idunn by the eagle also signifies old age and death – for all the gods. The image of the falcon flying from the eagle reminds me of the image of the eagle with a “wind-diminishing” hawk in between its eyes. If we take the eagle's daughter, Skadi into account, we will realize that her name literally means “harm, accident, death”.¹¹⁵ Skadi's association to death is further enhanced by her pleasure in wolves, mountains, and hunting. The giantess's presence appears to threaten the divine world itself, whose inhabitants do all they can to appease her. The link to the eagle in the World Tree is there: Thiazi is first seen sitting in the top of an enormous tree. The link to Hel is there in the figure of Skadi. Finally, the link to the corpse-swallowing wind-creator is not lacking either: both Snorri and Thiodolf make a point out of how the wind is whistling when the Thiazi beats his wings.

It should be added, in this respect, that the serpent-infested well in *Niflheim*, *Hvergelmir*, may be translated as “Eagle Cauldron”. A number of primeval giants, such as the first being in the Cosmos, *Aurgelmir* (“Aurr-Eagle”), and his descendants *Bergelmir* (“Fruit Eagle” or “Clear Eagle”) and *Thrudgelmir* (“Power Eagle”) have names that may be related to “Eagle”¹¹⁶.

A giant in eagle's disguise, then, may be a symbol of the devouring world of death. To be able to take off with the maiden that the eagle guards, it appears to be necessary to “kill” it, as Loki and the gods do in the *Haustlong*. It is tempting to suggest that death itself, in its all-devouring aspect, is “killed” when the maiden is rescued. The eagle is also associated with knowledge, as Snorri observed in the *Skáldskaparmál*.

¹¹⁵ Norrøn Ordbok

¹¹⁶ *Gelmir* – “the year-old”, is a poetic synonym for “eagle” (Norrøn Ordbok) In the first Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani, the shrieking of eagles is related to Creation. *Ber* – “berry” or “clear”, *thrud* – “power”, “might”, (Norrøn Ordbok). *Aurr* may signify “resplendant”, “shining”, “gold” related to liquids (Näsström 2001, p.148)

The Inside of a Mountain or Rock

The inside of a rock, filled with the pathways of giants, where Ódinn literally risks his life, may very well denote a realm of death: the burial mound or tomb. As Lotte Motz has pointed out, stones and boulders of magical endowment was a common concept in the Norse tradition, believed to be the dwellings of spirits and of the dead.¹¹⁷ Hilda Ellis Davidson describes the burial mound and the mound as such as sites where certain people would go for wisdom and inspiration, and in which would sometimes dwell elves or other spirit beings that could be sacrificed to.¹¹⁸ Jakobsdottir translates *Hnitbjörg* as “Collision-Cliffs”, regarding it as “the cliffs which crash together”. According to her, they are a perfect image of the Symplegades of Greek mythology; the cliffs which crash together around the perilous entrance to the world of the undead, the obstacle that the hero had to pass if he wished to find treasure in the other world. In the Old Indian epic Mahabharata, the eagle Garuda (like all “soma thieves”) has to pass through a wheel of flame to reach the soma, Water of Life. The wheel is pictured as golden, razor-sharp reeds that crash together in the blink of an eye. Jakobsdottir also convincingly shows how the serpent- and eagle-symbolisms of Ódinn’s disguise in Snorri’s version have their counterparts in Indian *soma* mythology.¹¹⁹ Our aim here, however, is not to understand the myth in light of comparative mythology, but to find the meaning within the Norse imagery itself. It is highly interesting that Ódinn takes upon himself the very imagery associated with the powers of death: the serpent and the eagle are both prominent characters in the realm of Hel.

Noise

There are several allusions to noise in the names just mentioned. Gunnlöd dwells in the “Beating Rock” (or “Collision-Cliffs”). As we shall discuss below, there is a puzzling similarity between the meaning of her father’s name and his association with a drink, and the doings of the giant Mimir, who drinks through a horn called the “Resounding Horn”.

¹¹⁷ Motz, 1983, p. 6-7

¹¹⁸ Davidson, 1964, p. 154-157

¹¹⁹ Jakobsdottir, 2002, p. 48-51

Suttungr's father is called *Gillingr* which means “the Noisy One” or “Screamer”¹²⁰. His wife was murdered with a millstone because the dwarf who killed her was weary of her howling.¹²¹ The noise is associated with the realm of death with its barking dogs, boundary river Loud Noise and its Resounding Bridge. All in all, the main imagery of the story may all be traced back to Hel's realm, and to some degree, to Mimir's Well of Wisdom.

4.5: The Initiations and Arts of Ódinn

Above we have seen that Ódinn learned the official arts of spell-songs or charms (*galdr*), the mastery of runes, and the use of eloquence in the ancient realm of the giants and in connection with a wedding to a giantess. There are reasons to believe that the specific area of Giant-world that he is visiting is the realm of death, through some symbolic characters and characteristics which resemble those of *Niflheim*. Gunnlöd may indeed be the mistress of death in disguise, and her embraces usually mean only the “pleasures” of death itself.¹²² Ódinn's escape alive from that realm, carrying with him the hidden and well-guarded mead of poetry and divine wisdom, means that he is in fact conquering death. Conquering death, gathering wisdom in the underworld, and returning with the arts of runes and *galdr* are not the only wisdom-quests that Ódinn undertakes. I believe that one should see all the arts of Ódinn and his manner of learning them in connection with each other.

Drink of Memory

Suttungr's name deserves mention. It means “Heavy with Drink” – one would perhaps assume him to be heavy with the very precious mead of memory and wisdom of which he is the owner. One other giant is associated with drinking in the mythology, and that is Mimir, whose name possibly means “Rememberer”.¹²³ He is full of learning because he drinks from the *Mimisbrunnr* – the Well of Memory, one of the three wells beneath the world tree – in the heart of the giant world. The well contains wisdom and knowledge.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Simek, 1996, p. 08

¹²¹ Faulkes, 1987, p. 62. The dwarf is the same who killed Kvasir and Gillingr.

¹²² See ch. 4.1 on how death may be described as a wedding or sexual union with the mistress of death

¹²³ Simek, 1996, p. 216

¹²⁴ Faulkes, 1987, p. 17

I believe it is worthwhile to note, here, that the mead served by the “Maiden” in other stories is often called the mead of memory (*minnisdrikk*). Mimir uses the *Gjallarhorn* – the Resounding Horn - to drink from. Ódinn paid one of his eyes in order to have a drink from that well ¹²⁵ – we must assume through the same horn. In the *Voluspá*, st. 28, the payment of Ódinn’s eye is somehow connected to the sad and violent fate of the world, whereas in the *Hávamál*, we may get the feeling that Ódinn’s breaking of the ring-oath has terrible, though unmentioned, consequences. This link in itself is thin, but I find that there is a connection between Ódinn in Suttungr’s realm and in that of Mimir, through the character of the two giants Suttungr and Mimir, who are both connected with a drink of wisdom, and both connected with what we shall call “Ódinn’s initiation”. The two giants may very well be identical. The well of Mimir is generally understood to be situated by a different root than that of Hel, just as the well of Urdr is thought to be by a third root. I believe we should not be too geographic in our understandings of the mythic universe. All the wells have that in common that they are situated at a root of the world tree, and we will see that the borders between the realms may not be as strict as they seem. We ought to remember that the runes which Ódinn “picked up” while hanging from the world tree, were indeed first carved into that very tree by Urdr and her norns, as is clearly stated in *Voluspá* st. 20. Thus, Ódinn has to move into the world of the norns to pick up the runes of fate, into the world of the giants to pick up the drink of memory, and, as we will see, into the world of death in order to drink the precious mead of the Maiden. In every case, Ódinn is initiated into sacred knowledge by a well at the root of the world tree, and in every case the root is connected to a watersource.¹²⁶

Seidr

“Njord’s daughter was Freya, she was a *blotgydja* (sacrificial priestess), she was the first who taught the Aesir to practice *seidr*, like the Vanir used to”.¹²⁷

That art which “contained the most power”, that of *seidr*, was taught to Ódinn and the *Æsir* gods by the *Vanir* goddess Freyia. Snorri explains that *seidr* originally was an art of the *Vanir*. Freyia came to the *Aesir* after the war between the tribes. The art of *seidr*, then, is related to the truce meeting between the Aesir and the Vanir. The same is the case

¹²⁵ Faulkes, 1987, p. 17

¹²⁶ Folke Ström, 1954, also identified the three wells with each other through a different kind of argument.

¹²⁷ Snorres Kongesagaer, 1944, p. 4 (my translation)

with the mead of poetry, which was created during that very truce, or, according to another text, originated solely among the *Vanir*.¹²⁸ The art of *seidr* must have come to the *Aesir* around the same time as the art of poetry that Ódinn later brought back from the *Hnitbjörg* and Gunnlöd. We do not know any more details of this myth, but it places Freyia in a position of teacher and Ódinn as her student. As we shall see later, Freyia is identifiable as the Maiden with the Mead and thus with the giantess Gunnlöd. The links we have discussed convince me that Ódinn's initiation on the world tree is really associated both with his learning of *seidr* from Freyia, runes (from the *norns*?), *galdr* from the "old giant", poetry and wisdom from Gunnlöd, and with Mimir's drink of Memory.

4.6: Ódinn as Divine Archetype

It is necessary to note that the main actor in the story is a god – even a god of creation. We also know that the story takes place in the beginning of time, just after the great battle between the *Aesir* and the *Vanir*, before the valkyries enter the cosmic scene. If we consider the mead strictly as a mead that makes you into a poet, then poetry is one of the many arts in which Ódinn is supreme – and the first to teach to humankind.¹²⁹

Snorri's account in the *Ynglinga Saga* makes Ódinn stand out as the teacher and inventor of all the magical arts that priests and priestesses were required to know: eloquence, battle-frenzy, sorcery against enemies, change-shaping into the hides of animals, communication with the other worlds, traveling with the free-soul,¹³⁰ manipulation of natural elements like fire, wind and sea, the singing of spell-songs, the foretelling of the future and the opening up of the hidden realms within earth, rock or mound. Ódinn, the oldest of gods, is the teacher, meaning something significant: namely that all the arts and the practitioners just mentioned had a beginning: a divine archetype.

¹²⁸ Faulkes, 1987, p.62.64: Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* claims that Kvasir, whose blood became the mead of poetry, was created from the spit of the two tribes of gods during their truce meeting. But in the *Heimskringla*, Snorri claims that Kvasir was the wisest man among the *Vanir* and that he came to Ásgarðr together with the Njordr-family. (Snorres Kongesagaer, 144, p. 4). Apparently there were two versions of the story.

¹²⁹ See Appendix IV

¹³⁰ See ch. 3.1 about shamanism and the free-soul.

As we discussed in ch. 4.5, Ódinn appears to have learned his arts by the wells beneath the world tree. Indeed, other sources indicate that learning religious lore by a water source was common far into medieval times. As bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson stated sometime in the beginning of the 13th century: “I never learned the art of poetry by the water-source. I never performed *galdr*, and I never sat below a hanged man”. What the bishop, as a good Christian, is not doing is most probably what the pagan would do. In his statement, we may detect practices that indeed were common for the religious professional in pre-Christian times,¹³¹ and they do seem to form quite an echo of Ódinn’s actions: learning the art of poetry by the well, singing charms, and “sitting below a hanged man”, possibly a way of communicating with the spirits of the dead. Solli has suggested that the latter practice also could indicate a sitting below a person who is only symbolically hanged, that is, an initiate who, like Ódinn, lets himself be “hanged” and “stabbed” but only in a manner that, however dangerously, enables him to achieve visions and ecstatic experiences.¹³²

As the *Hávamal* and other sources make clear, Ódinn did not just invent the arts out of nothing – he obtained them, he acquired them, through practices that set an example for others to follow. When we read about the exploits of Ódinn it is my conviction that they ought to be seen as divine archetypes for later (human) magical behavior.

4.7: Summary: What Ódinn Learns

Through comparative analysis of the different “wisdom quests” of Ódinn, I have concluded that they may all be linked together. They include a trial of hardship leading to visions and descents into the lower worlds, where he is taught by supernatural beings. The teachings and the trials eventually lead to a ritual drinking séance and a sacred marriage, and, finally, to Ódinn becoming a great sage. That we are speaking of an initiation, as defined in ch. 3.1, is confirmed by the result: Ódinn’s new state of being. But what kind of state is he initiated into?

¹³¹ Hedeager, 1999, p. 9, my translation of the statement from Norwegian

¹³² Solli, 2002, p. 159-163

Snorri's account of Ódinn's arts as summed up above and presented in appendix IV, are all to be recognized in the various myths of his initiatory trials and may be identified with arts that we know to be common within Norse society as well as some arts that scholars are more uncertain about. The known common arts that Ódinn obtains during his trials are those of poetry, runes, *galdr*, esoteric knowledge and *seidr*. **Poetry** in Norse society was a highly respected art and required a profound knowledge of mythical facts in order to apply poetic metaphors and allusions. The *skald* – the bard – may have had his older counterpart in the *thul*, (see ch. 3.3) whose title basically means “reciter” and refers to a sage of some kind, specializing in chanting and reciting – of poetry? He may be a kind of priest, or even a shaman (see ch. 3.1). The one telling the tale of the initiation by hanging on the world tree is speaking from the “chair of the *thul*”, and may either be Ódinn himself or actually a *thul*, as discussed in ch. 3.1 and ch. 4.2. **Runes** are a kind of letters, but their etymological significance is “hidden knowledge” or “whisper”,¹³³ and they were related to fate and destiny, as they were first carved by the *norns*, mistresses of fate. They were often used for healing and spells and the casting of lots for divination. **Galdr** is derived from the verb *gala*, which means the sound that the rooster makes, denoting a high-pitched voice.¹³⁴ It was a way of making spells and had its counterpart in other magical songs such as the *vardlokkur* and the *seidlæti* (“magic tune”). **Seidr** has an uncertain etymology, but it may mean “to sing”, something which connects it to the art of *galdr*. Indeed, magical songs were used to call the *vættir* – spirits – to aid in séances of *seidr*. *Seidr* appears to have centered on divination, magic and sorcery. As we saw in ch. 3.1, many are those who have connected the arts of *seidr* and *galdr* with a supposed Norse form of shamanism. Other arts of Ódinn do indeed resemble shamanism insofar as he is said to travel with his soul to other “countries” in order to bring back information for himself or for others. His descent into the world of *Gunnlöd* may be another such tale, but it may refer to something even more crucial than the gathering of information; it may include the art of conquering death. This is a quite common theme in the history of religions and known, among other things, in mystery cults of the goddess.

¹³³ *Norrøn Ordbok*

¹³⁴ *Näsström, 2001, p. 57*

So far, we have not really discussed the drink that the Gunnlöð offers. Steinsland calls this kind of drink “materialized knowledge”.¹³⁵ As we saw in ch. 3.2, the ritual offering of mead may have been part of a general welcome into the hall of a ruler, a consecration into a sacred office, perhaps part of a kingship inauguration, or indeed, of marriage, in this case sacred marriage since at least one of the partners is divine. None of these possibilities need exclude the others. The drink is identified as the drink of poetry created by the truce between the gods (or as coming from the *Vanir*). It contains hidden wisdom, all the intelligence of the world, and it will make the drinker a great poet and sage. Seen in the light of all the trials that Ódinn has to go through to get the precious draughts, the drinking and the subsequent “marriage” appears to be the culmination and the confirmation.

The Maiden, a giantess, is situated within a realm that bears resemblance to the realm of Hel, death itself. It is surrounded by obstacles which she helps the hero to conquer.

The hero, in this case a god, undergoes a trial involving fasting and physical hardships, in which he learns powerful arts: There is a connection between these arts and the art of *seidr* through the arrival of Freyia and the Vanir to Ásgard – an event which induces both the creation of the sacred mead, Ódinn’s subsequent trials on the world tree, and Freyia’s teaching him the art of *seidr*. There is also a link to Ódinn’s sacrifice of his eye by the well of Memory. Ström, like myself, sees a parallel in Ódinn’s eye-sacrifice and his hanging, and he also identifies the three wells as really being one and the same.¹³⁶

Many of the arts of Ódinn are conveyed by female characters: The mead of knowledge and poetry is given by Gunnlöð, the art of *seidr* is given by Freyia, and the runes that Ódinn brings up to Earth’s sanctuary were, according to *Voluspá* st. 20, originally carved by the norns Urdr and Verdandi. Thus we see how teacher figures for the god are found in giantesses, goddesses, and norns, creatures of different realms, linked to each other through their functions. It is also interesting to note how all of them are associated with sacred liquids, as we shall see in the following chapters. Only one of Ódinn’s mentors is

¹³⁵ Steinsland, 1997, p. 126

¹³⁶ Ström, 1954, p. 88-91

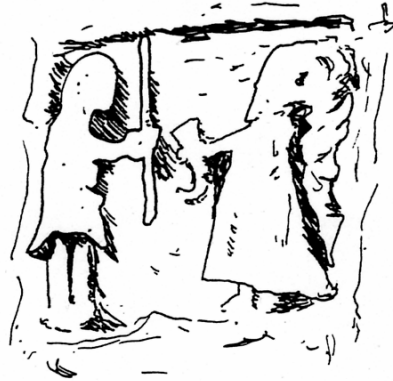
male; the unnamed giant who is his mother's brother. However, he acts in the manner of a helper, while the the Maiden is the goal and the initiation itself. As we shall see in the *Gróagaldr*, the *galdr* that the hero is taught is a means to reach the actual goal. Likewise, Ódinn is taught the *galdr* from the unnamed giant before he has a drink from Poetry Stir. In Snorri's version the giant *Baugi* helps Ódinn on his way to the drink of poetry. In fact, these giant figures could very well resemble human mentors in a ritual setting. Gunnlöd, the Maiden, appears in a different light, being placed right where the goal is, its guardian, its conveyer. Her offering of the mead is the consecration, her embrace the culmination and the step to freedom from death.

Ódinn's trials may be seen in the light of an initiation ritual, as shown by Näsström, who regards them as the initiation trials of a religious professional, much akin to the trials of initiation in mystic religions.¹³⁷

Ódinn as a god is setting an example for others to follow; as Snorri remarked, he taught the arts to the priests and priestesses, who practiced and taught them on to the people. Thus we have a thesis on which to build the rest of our study: that the trials and the teachings, and, indeed, the sacred marriage of Ódinn in Gunnlöd's realm, are met with by humanbeings in his aftermath.

¹³⁷ Näsström, 2001, p.165-173

4.8: THE WOOING OF GERDR



Late Viking Age -Detail on
Gosforth cross, Cumbria

Gerdr means “Enclosure” and is the name of another daughter of giants in the *Skírnismál*. The god Freyr sits down in the *Hlidskialf*, “the Opening Watch-Tower”,¹³⁸ usually the seat of Ódinn and Frigg, from where he sees into all the worlds. He spots a maiden in the courts of the giant *Gymir* and falls violently in love. His servant, *Skírnir*, -the “Shining One” or the “Pure One”¹³⁹ offers to woo the maiden for him, if the god will only grant him “the horse that will carry him through the dark, sure, flickering flame”, and the “sword which fights by itself against the giants”.¹⁴⁰ Freyr grants him these treasures, and his servant sets off towards the realm of the giants on that magical horse.

Skírnir rides through darkness and dewy mountains. St. 10 (see appendix V) clearly states that his is a very dangerous, nocturnal journey through the world of the *thursar* were the “too powerful giant” may very well take both the horse and its rider. Skírnir encounters savage dogs outside of the fence surrounding the hall of the Maiden. He asks a herdsman who is sitting on a mound how to come past the “dogs of Gymir”. The herdsman, surprised by the request, does not answer but questions whether Skírnir is dead or about to die, before he apparently decides that he is neither, and states that there can be no conversation between him and the daughter of Gymir. It could seem as if one has to be

¹³⁸ Simek, 1996, p. 152. The meaning is disputed, but could come from *hlid*, “opening”, and *skialf*, “watchtower”.

¹³⁹ Simek, 1996, p. 290, from *skirr*, “clean”, “clear”

¹⁴⁰ *Skírnismál* st. 8

dead or dying in order to “converse” with the giantess. Gerdr, however, who hears the earth trembling and learns about Skírnir’s presence, asks him to come into her halls and drink *inn mera mioth*¹⁴¹ - the “adored mead” - even though she fears that he is her brother’s slayer. Skírnir crosses the fire-fence, and the Maiden asks him if he is elf, or a god of the Aesir or of the Vanir.

Skírnir responds that he is neither elf, Áss, or of the Vanir, and immediately asks her to become Freyr’s bride, offering her eleven apples of gold and the ring that drips nine new ones like itself every ninth night. Gerdr flatly refuses. She has more than enough gold in her father’s hall. Skírnir threatens her with the sword, but she again refuses, arguing that Gymir, her father, could well fight back. Eventually, Skírnir makes use of *galdr* to curse her in the most deliberate ways. Suddenly, the maiden changes her mind, welcomes him and offers him the “crystal cup full of ancient mead” (*hrimcálki fullom forns miathar*¹⁴²). She declares that she will meet Freyr within nine nights, in the breeze-less grove of *Barri*.¹⁴³ Freyr, when he learns about her conditions, does not rejoice, but complains about the duration of nine whole nights.

4.9: The Structure of Themes in Gerdr’s story

As in the story of Gunnlöd and Ódinn, we may here detect the same structure of themes. The poem begins with a (prose) vision quest theme: Freyr sits down in Ódinn’s seat, from where he may look out upon “all the worlds”. This kind of universal vision from a special, divine kind of position could hardly resemble anything else than a visionary experience. The vision theme follows as Freyr lays eyes on a Maiden in a far-off world whose arms illuminate the oceans and the hills as she walks. She is clearly in another world, different from that of Freyr’s, and may only be seen by him through such supernatural sight. Then follows a descending theme where not Freyr, but his “servant”, who is neither elf or god, moves into the lower worlds. Like Ódinn, he has to know how to talk in his encounter with the giant herdsman and the giantess. The trial theme follows

¹⁴¹ *Skírnismál*, st. 16. *Mera* is translated as “precious” (dyrebar) by Holm-Olsen, and as “famous” by Larrington. In the dictionary I could only find *mæra*, (from *mærd*, f.), to “honour”, “adore”, “adorn”.

¹⁴² *Skírnismál*, st. 37

¹⁴³ From *barr*, “barley” or “conifer”. Simek, 1996, p. 32

as Skírnir moves past the flickering fires and the barking dogs to enter the hall of Gerdr. He is greeted by her, and thus we proceed to the Maiden theme where she offers him a drink and, after a duel of words where Skírnir, like Ódinn, has to show his eloquence, agrees to marriage while offering a drink.

As Skírnir returns to Freyr with the message, it becomes clear, at least to my mind, that the descending-, trial- and Maiden- themes will be repeated: Skírnir has made the initiating journey on behalf of Freyr after the latter's visionary experience, but now, Freyr has to make the journey himself. The Maiden does not pack her belongings to join Skírnir on his way back to the divine realm. Instead, she decides the conditions of their union: that Freyr will have to endure nine nights before their meeting in a breezeless grove. Freyr is right to complain about the duration of those nine nights and worry how he shall survive even one or three of them, for they are probably as tough as the nine nights of Ódinn's hanging, and will only culminate in a sacred grove where the winds - of the eagle Corpse Swallower - do not reach.

4.10: The Maiden and Her Realm

"...The raging guard-dogs of Gymir (...) the shepherd on the grave-mound, and, together with the grave-mound, contribute to the scenery of the entrance to the world of the dead with its` perpetual tribe of Cerberus."

Ursula Dronke¹⁴⁴

Since we have established Gunnlöð as dwelling in a realm of death, we must ask ourselves whether Gerdr also does so. Indeed, she does. The dark, wet road, the trembling earth, the wall (of fire) that must not be touched, and the barking dogs are all typical symbols of the world of Hel. The barking dogs motivate a conversation with a shepherd who sits on a grave-mound. The shepherd assumes that Skírnir must be dead or dying, as one would usually be when traveling the Hel-Road. When he realizes that Skírnir is a living soul, he assumes that there may be no meeting with Gerdr. If she is the lady of death itself, this is a logical assumption.

We are so lucky as to have very detailed descriptions of the Norse world of the dead.

¹⁴⁴ Dronke, 1997, p. 390

In Snorri's story of Hermodr, we are told how Hermodr rides to Hel in order to bring Baldr back from the world of the dead:

...Hermod rode for **nine nights** through valleys **dark** and deep so that he saw nothing until he came to the river Gioll [Resounding] and rode on to the Gioll bridge. It is covered with glowing gold. There is a maiden guarding the bridge called Modgud [Furious Battle]. She asked him his name and lineage and said that there had ridden over the bridge five battalions of dead men. –“But the **bridge resounds** no less under just you, and **you do not have the colour of dead men**. Why are you riding here on the road to Hel? “ (...) Then Hermod rode on until he came to Hel's gates. (...) The horse **jumped so hard over the gate that it came nowhere near**.¹⁴⁵

In the *Baldrs draumar* we have a similar description, this time, it is Ódinn who rides to Hel to obtain intelligence about some dark omens:

2....reid hann nidr thathan Niflhæliar til
mætti hann hvælpí þeim ær or hæliu kom.

...He rode down to the Misty Hel
he met a **dog of Hel** on the road

3. Sa var blodugr um briost framan
oc galldrs fodur gol um længi
Framm reid Odinn folldvægr dundi
hann kom at háfu Hæliar ranni

Its breast was bloody
it **barked** a long time against the father of spell-songs
Ódinn rode forth, the **road beneath him resounded**
he came to the **High Hall** of Hel

4. Thá ræid Odinn fyrir austan dyr
thar ær hann vissi völv læidi.
Nam hann vittugri valgalldr kveda....¹⁴⁶

Then Ódinn **rode to the east of the door**
where he knew about a *völva's* grave
he sang *val-galdr* for the wise woman...

Skírnir's journey would easily fit into the pattern shown in these two sources. He rides a magical steed that has the particular quality of being able to jump through flames –the flames which constitute the fence around Gerdr's hall. So do Ódinn and Hermodr –they both ride the eight-legged Sleipnir, and a point is made out of how they avoid touching the gate of Hel. The road is dark and long. The earth trembles when Skírnir arrives, so does the Resounding Bridge when Hermod rides over it, and Ódinn's road resounds. Skírnir encounters savage dogs, just like Ódinn. He has to cross a fiery fence; Hermodr and Ódinn have to cross a fence or a gate. The female warden at the Resounding Bridge remarks that Hermodr does not have the color of dead men, the male warden or mound-dweller outside of the hall of Gerd asks Skírnir whether he is dead or marked to die.

¹⁴⁵ Faulkes, 1987, p. 50

¹⁴⁶ *Baldrs Draumar* st. 2, 3, 4

Gerdr's father is Gymir, which according to Simek could mean "Sea".¹⁴⁷ Simek suggests that he is a sea-giant, since he is identified with the sea-giant Ægir both in the *Lokasenna* and in the *Skáldskaparmál* 23. Ægir is the husband of Rán, mistress of death, and is certainly associated with cauldrons and mead, as shown in the beginning of the *Skáldskaparmál* and in the poem *Hymiskvida*. In chapter 6.10, we shall see that sea-giants are connected to the Maiden in her aspect as valkyrie. The etymological meaning of Gymir is unclear, but Simek suggests that it could, for example, come from the word *geyma*, which means to hide, keep safe. In that case, we are reminded of Suttungr who hides the mead (and the Maiden) within the rock-layers. For the time being, I would wish to emphasize that Ægir's realm also is a realm of the dead.

Much else is not to be said about Gerdr, except that she offers ancient or adored mead, has beautiful, shining arms which shines up all the lands and the sea, and that she is in possession of lots of gold and an independent mind. She is surrounded by a fence of fire. All in all, it seems safe to place Gerdr right in the heart of misty Hel.

4.11: The Trials of the Heroes

Freyr is a god and an ancestor of kings, and it is his servant and childhood companion, the Shining One (or the "Clear One" or the "Pure One"), who gets the task of actually traveling to the other world. The servant asks, one could imagine as if in prayer to the god, to have a magical horse and a magical sword, which he is granted. The theme of a chief's servant actually undertaking the "wooing" part of the quest for the Maiden will be recognized in ch. 7.2, where this kind of servant resembles a religious professional. The Maiden expects him to be an elf, *Áss* or wise *Vanir*, moving about in the Other Worlds. The riddle presented when Skírnir presents himself as neither elf nor god, could be explained by the possibility of him being human.

The magical horse and the sword is something Skírnir shares with the hero Sigurd (ch.6) with the hero Hermodr and with the god Ódinn. It is worthwhile to note how the journey

¹⁴⁷ Simek, 1996, p. 126, 127

to the world of the dead in the Norse material often is pictured on horse-back – horses being a common sacrifice in burial mounds. An older and equally important “steed” to the underworld is the (funeral) ship, which we shall see is the more common vehicle in the Heroic Poems. For women, the journey was often pictured as driving a chariot – an image we recognize in *Helreidr Brynhildar*.¹⁴⁸ The magical sword is crucial also in the stories of the two Helgis, which we shall be studying in chapter 6.

Skírnir, like Ódinn, has to enter the deadly realm of the powerful giants in order to encounter the Maiden. It is in the encounter that his trial differs dramatically from that of Ódinn, who obviously receives teachings. Skírnir does not appear interested any teachings at all: he offers gifts to entice the Maiden out of her realm, and when she refuses he threatens and curses her. He appears successful in his task when Gerdr suddenly greets him as “lad”(sveinn¹⁴⁹) and offers him the mead. We do not learn whether Skírnir drinks the mead, and he continues uninterested in teachings, eagerly asking when she will meet Freyr. Freyr’s devastated reaction to her answer is odd. Perhaps it is considered a sign of the immense sexual desire of the fertility god, who cannot bear to wait for nine nights. I believe, however, that those nine nights really are long: as long as the nine dark nights that Hermodr had to endure on his way to Hel, and as hard as the work of nine men that Odin in Snorri’s version had to finish in the fields of Baugi, as dangerous as the nine nights that the god hangs stabbed, starving and thirsting, on the world tree. Indeed, Freyr’s nights must be as uncertain as the three nights that we will see that Óttarr is granted to learn his sacred genealogy, and as powerful as the nine spell-songs that transport Svípdag to the halls of the goddess.¹⁵⁰ The number nine is no coincidence, it symbolizes something which we can only vaguely deduce from the other settings in which the number appears. Those particular nine nights shall be concluded in a breeze-less grove (*lund lognfarna*¹⁵¹) – a place where the winds of the death-eagle’s wings do not reach. The theme of conquering death may be subtly revealed in this allusion.

¹⁴⁸ Ellis Davidson, 1964, p. 154,

¹⁴⁹ *Skírnismál* st. 37

¹⁵⁰ See *Hyndluljóð*, *Svipdagsmál*, and ch. 5

¹⁵¹ *Skírnismál*, st. 39

4.11: The gifts and the threats

“She does not capitulate because he has frightened her, but because she sees some truth in what he says. (...) he has painted the alternative very well.”¹⁵²

A few words on the gifts and the threats that the Maiden receives are perhaps necessary. Steinsland has shown how the gifts: apples and ring, and the wand that Skírnir uses to curse with, all resemble royal symbols that may connect the myth to kingship (and thus sacred marriage).¹⁵³ Näsström, moreover, sees the three methods used to conquer Gerdr as representing the three Indo-European “functions” (as described by Dumézil) in society. Gold and riches represent the “third” function: that of the peasants, the sword he uses to threaten her represent the warrior function, while the magical wand and the curses represent the first, priestly function.¹⁵⁴ The curses are perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the myth: they take up a great part of the poem and are extremely aggressive. But as Ursula Dronke has suggested, Skírnir with his curses is only really summing up what Gerdr may in fact expect if she stays in the Underworld: separation from society, despair and longing, relations only to ogres and the world of the dead. With the curses, Gerdr is shown the two opposite worlds between which she may choose: the world of the dead with its devouring monsters and suffering, and the world of divine life, and love.¹⁵⁵ Also Clunies-Ross has argued that Skírnir’s curse “functions to remind Gerdr of what is at stake in her refusal to cooperate.”¹⁵⁶ One image is particularly interesting to this study, since Gerdr, in st. 28, is told that she will be more famous than the guardian of gods, where she is gaping behind the fences of Hel. Thus she is imaged as a guardian of Hel – unless she lets herself be taken out of that realm.

¹⁵² Dronke, 1997, p. 395

¹⁵³ Steinsland, 1991

¹⁵⁴ Näsström, 1998, p. 140

¹⁵⁵ Dronke, 1997, p. 395. Dronke perceives Gerd to symbolize the Earth who is “woken up” from the death of winter by the shining ray (Skirnir) of the Sun god (Freyr). This understanding of the myth used to be very common, but has been disputed by amongst others Gro Steinsland, 1991, and others. See appendix..

¹⁵⁶ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 140

4.12: Skírnir as the experienced Practitioner, Freyr as the Initiate

I understand Skírnir's journey to be the initiatory journey of an experienced practitioner on behalf of the god – or the one who represents the god - in order to “woo the Maiden”. When the Maiden has given her terms and her consent, Skírnir, carrier of the magical wand and the treasures of the gods, goes back to his master who has had the initial vision, and tells him the message. I believe that it is only then that the actual initiation experience begins, symbolized in the nine nights Freyr will have to endure before culminating in the consecrating act of Sacred Marriage .

As we noted, Skírnir does not himself appear to receive any teachings, but returns hurriedly back to his lord-friend, telling him the terms of the Maiden. This is when I assume that the real trials begin: the trials of Freyr himself, the king-god. They shall last for nine whole nights, where even the first will be unbearably long. The suffering will only finish when Freyr has reached that breezeless grove of the Maiden. It seems reasonable to assume that Freyr would have to follow a similar path to that of Skírnir's descent.

4.13: Summary of and Conclusions to Chapter 4

In this chapter, I have argued that Ódinn's trials on the world tree is directly linked to his encounter with Gunnlöd, and that Gunnlöd dwells in a realm that resemble that of Hel's, or more generally, a realm of death. Steinsland has shown that there exists a multitude of pre-Christian ideas about the after-life so that our geographical assumptions which strictly place the realm of Hel here and other realms there in the manner of Snorri's descriptions may not be covering the whole of Norse conceptions about death. One image which, until Steinsland pointed it out, has been largely neglected, is the fact that death often is depicted as a sexual encounter or marriage with a supernatural lady, often identifiable as Rán or Hel, although mentioned by other names.¹⁵⁷ Ódinn's descent into

¹⁵⁷ Steinsland, 1992, p. 319-332

the death-realm of Gunnlöð is not only connected to his nine-night's self-sacrifice, but also to the initiation into his major arts: runes, charms, esoteric knowledge, soul-flight, *seidr*, and poetry (eloquence). Through his method of learning – the descent into and the escape alive from the realm of death, he also learns a way of “conquering death”, bringing back with him sacred knowledge and talents symbolized in the precious mead. He has help from the Maiden figure. Through comparative analysis such as that of Svava Jacobsdottir, it is possible to link Óðinn's experience to kingship inauguration as well. However, the initiation seems to be of a more general character that would easily apply to several religious practitioners in the Norse society. I have argued that Óðinn's quest is primordial and archetypal: it creates a mythical pattern for others to follow.

In the *Codex Regius*, the first who apparently follows Óðinn's example is the Vanir god Freyr, who, significantly, sits down in Óðinn's own seat in order to have cosmic vision. Much like Óðinn, he peers down and detects the object of his desire: the Maiden, this time in the shape of Gerdr. In the Óðinn-Gunnlöð section, I detected a **structure of themes** involving a vision quest theme, a vision theme, a descending theme, a trial theme and a Maiden theme. I have argued that the Freyr-Gerdr story follows a very similar structural pattern and that the contents of each theme in the latter story also resemble the contents of the former to a significant degree.

The main difference between the Gunnlöð and Gerdr stories is, to my view, the emphasis, the outcome, and the existence of a second character in Gerdr's case. The Gunnlöð story tones down the marriage theme on behalf of the teaching theme, and Óðinn operates by himself. The marriage theme certainly exists, and we learn that Óðinn breaks his ring-oath and betrays Suttungr and Gunnlöð in the end. The marriage or sexual union is the means by which Óðinn achieves what he is really there for: the mead of poetry, of divine knowledge. The mead appears to function as a symbol for all the arts that Óðinn learns. Emphasis in the story is on Óðinn's trials and the outcome: his becoming a sage, bringing a sacred treasure from the Underworld into the divine realm or to the “shrine of Earth”.

The Gerdr story focuses much more strongly on the marriage theme. The main aim is to convince the giantess to leave her realm, marry the god and become one among the *Àsynjur*, the goddesses. From other sources we know that there existed a tradition in which Gerdr really became Freyr's wife and that they had a son who became the founder of a royal line. Steinsland has shown how the union represents a sacred marriage myth which helped to legitimize a royal line, and how it is significant that the marriage is between a god and a giantess, two polar forces in the universe creating something entirely new and powerful, a king figure. The myth possibly also formed a model for rituals of kingship inauguration.¹⁵⁸ While the initiation of Ódinn resembles those of priests, shamans, mystics or ascetics as much as those of rulers, the initiation of Freyr, *folkvaldi goda* – “the gods' chief of the people”¹⁵⁹ - seems to point more clearly in the direction of kingship inauguration in connection to sacred marriage. But the religious practitioner is not out of the picture; he appears, in my opinion, in the character of Skírnir, who somehow “makes way” for the young god-king, and in the structural pattern that the initiation follows, which resembles that of Ódinn's to a significant degree.

Finally, something must be said about the “Maiden”. Gunnlöd and Gerdr, not to say the myths surrounding them, resemble each other closely in function. They dwell in a realm of giants that may be identified with a realm of death. They are strongly protected by physical obstacles and giant fathers. They are both giantesses being wedded to gods. They both have power over a precious, ancient mead, which they serve to their hero in a welcome. They are both associated to gold (golden chair, golden treasures). Gerdr is associated to bright, illuminating shine, something we shall see that she shares with the other Maiden-figures. They are both the focal point of a similar tale of initiation. Their stories follow much the same thematic structure. Their fates depart from each other in the way they are treated by the gods who woo them: Gunnlöd is deprived of her “whole soul”, and left weeping behind. Gerdr is, in order to *kaupa fridr* – buy peace - invited to stay in Ásgarðr as a goddess among goddesses, an invitation she eventually, however reluctantly, accepts.

¹⁵⁸ See ch. 3.1 on Sacred Marriage

¹⁵⁹ *Skírnismál* st. 3

The difference is puzzling but not enough to confuse our thesis. In both cases, a point is made out of the life-death-opposition. Ódinn could not have escaped Suttungr's deadly halls without the help of Gunnlöd. Her realm is that of death, and through her love and gifts (and perhaps the knowledge Ódinn achieves during his quest), she provides a way for him to fly away. The frost-giants ask themselves whether Ódinn died at Suttungr's hands or whether he is (alive) among the gods: We know the answer, and it is Gunnlöd who caused the happy outcome. As I have pointed out before, the embrace of the mistress of death did in fact mean death itself. Ódinn escaped through her help, however unwittingly she provided it.

In the case of Gerdr, the structure takes a new turn which is to be evolved in the subsequent stories of the human initiants of the following chapters. Through Skírnir's curses, we see how Gerdr is shown the two possible turns of her fate: She may become a dweller of the Underworld, a grotesque ogress at the gates of Hel. Such a figure is in fact known from the myths elsewhere and must have been an existing tradition in the concepts of the Underworld. Gerdr may decide to be that, or to become a goddess, a wife of the constantly rejuvenated gods, the opposite of residence among the dead. When Gerdr is made aware of the options, she decides to take Freyr as her lover, but it is up to him to find her through a nine night's trial. Their meeting in the breezeless grove may very well represent something similar to Ódinn's flight and subsequent dwelling "among the gods": a place of no death.

5: The Great Goddess

In this chapter, we shall explore the “Maiden-myth” of the poems *Hyndluljóð*, the *Gróagaldr* and the *Fjölsvinnsmál*. The two latter poems are usually studied together as the so-called “*Svípdagsmál*” since they seem to be connected with each other.¹⁶⁰ The poem *Fjölsvinnsmál* has been transmitted through a rather late manuscript from the 17th century, and most 20th century scholars have disregarded the poem as a late medieval poem not to be reckoned among the “real” Edda-poems but rather as a fairy tale imported from the continent, perhaps Celtic in origin. In his study of the poem, Eldar Heide shows how the poem must be counted among the old Divine Poems and that it is an important source to Nordic mythology, even a key to the understanding of cosmology in the old, pre-Christian religion. The mythical pattern of the *Fjölsvinnsmál* is comparable to other more commonly accepted sources to Norse mythology. Heide chooses to study the *Fjölsvinnsmál* as a separate poem, the way it is presented in the source-material, since it is possible to read it as a complete lay in itself even though the *Gróagaldr* appears to be closely related.¹⁶¹ I agree with Heide that both poems are no more “fairy-tale”-like than other Edda poems, and no less pagan in origin. But I disagree with Heide when he maintains that the *Gróagaldr* has no function in the *Fjölsvinnsmál*. Heide admits that the two poems may form part of the same story, even if they are two separate lays.¹⁶² As Lotte Motz has argued earlier, the combination of the poems into a “*Svípdagsmál*” makes sense since the charms of *Gróagaldr* could appear to be describing an initiation ritual.¹⁶³ In fact, the *Gróagaldr* and the *Fjölsvinnsmál* together fit perfectly into the pattern of “Maiden-mythology” that we are discovering in other Edda poems, which means that they must reflect the same older mythical reality hiding behind the Gerdr-, Gunnlöd-, Freyia- and valkyrie-stories. Even if the two poems may be read separately from each other, I find it fruitful to read both together as a “*Svípdagsmál*”, since *Fjölsvinnsmál*

¹⁶⁰ In 1856, Sophus Bugge and Svein Grundtvig decided that the poems *Gróagaldr* and *Fjölsvinnsmál* must be understood together as a bigger poem: the *Svipdagsmál* -a title constructed by these scholars. This view is basically founded on how a very similar story appears in a 16th century Danish fairy tale; the *Ungen Svejdal* (Grundtvig, 1996(1856)). Their theory is commonly accepted today. Heide, 1997, p. 12

¹⁶¹ Heide, 1997, p. 38-44, 50-51

¹⁶² Heide, 1997, p. 39,40

¹⁶³ Motz, 1975, p. 135

without the *Gróagaldr* loses the initiatory “vision-quest theme” and trials under guidance from a “master” (in this case a female) that lead Svípdag to the high hall of the Maiden where the ultimate trial begins. Even when read on their own, the two poems reveal parts of the same “Maiden-mythology” that we find in the *Hávamál* and in the *Skírnismál*. Read together, the two poems as separate parts of one story follow the pattern of other “Maiden-stories” perfectly.

Menglöd is not known from other sources than the jointed “Svípdagsmál”, but she shares many characteristics with Freyia. Scholars have mainly identified her through her name, which is supposed to be derived from *men* – necklace, gold or treasure - and *glöd*, which is supposed to be a derivation of *gladr* –“bright”, “clear”, “light”, “joyful”, “happy” or “quick”.¹⁶⁴ Many scholars have assumed that the name indicates “the One Who takes Pleasure in Jewels.”¹⁶⁵ Since Freyia is associated with jewels and gold, especially a certain bright necklace called the *Brisingamen* – the “Fiery Necklace”,¹⁶⁶ the name Menglöd itself lends to the identification of the two figures. Menglöd, moreover, is situated behind a dangerous fence which will only open for the “right one”, a feature she shares with Freyia (and, indeed, with Gerdr). Menglöd’s hall is also very beautiful, and the story about her is a love story, fitting into the pattern of our popular idea of Freyia as a goddess of love. Besides, Menglöd is waiting and yearning for her long lost husband, just like Freyia (and Gunnlöd). Menglöd is surrounded by maidens, nine in number. As we know, Freyia is associated with a kind of maidens called the valkyries, who, as we shall see in ch. 6, usually appear in a collective of nine.

The meaning of Menglöd’s name is, however, challenged by Svava Jacobsdottir. She argues that the name could be derived from OE *mengan* – “to mix”, and *löd* – “invitation” or “drink” (like the *löd* in *Gunnlöd*). Thus the name indicates the invitation to a mixture – a drink. This is in accordance with the mead-serving goddess of the Irish sources, who often takes her name from the drink she serves.¹⁶⁷ In the interpretation

¹⁶⁴ Norrøn Ordbok. Simek, 1996, p. 210

¹⁶⁵ Simek, 1996, p. 210

¹⁶⁶ Simek, 1996, p. 44-45. Either from *brisa* –“to shine”, or from *brisingr*, “fire”

¹⁶⁷ Jacobsdottir, 2002, p. 45

“Invitation to a Drink” we are perhaps perceiving a tradition of a Maiden who is not only associated with, but even identified with, the precious mead. In ch. 8 we will discuss the *völva* Gullveig in the light of Maiden-mythology. Her name may be translated as “Golden Drink”.

Menglöd’s goddess-hood is also challenged by Eldar Heide, who argues that her character is that of a giantess.¹⁶⁸ In my study, the opposition “giantess vs. goddess” is not overly problematic since the Maiden figure, as we shall argue, covers both giantess-, goddess- and valkyrie-hood.

The authenticity of the *Hyndluljod* has also been questioned by scholars. The poem tells of how Óttarr descends to an Underworld to learn about his “ancestry”. But after being told of what may be accepted as a human, legendary ancestry, his teacher, a giantess who has much in common with a *volva*, proceeds to reveal cosmic secrets of a visionary nature much like those of the poem *Voluspá*. Since Óttarr has descended with the goddess in order to obtain knowledge of his ancestry, most scholars have been rather puzzled about the nature of the teachings. Larrington and Simek among many others claim that the stanzas 29-44 constitute an interpolation of an entirely different poem, namely what Snorri mentions as the *Voluspá in skamma* – “The Short Prophecy of the *Völva*”.¹⁶⁹ However, Steinsland argues that the poem *Hyndluljod* is complete in itself, and that the esoteric nature of the teachings is part of Óttarr’s “ancestry” – he is actually learning that everything – gods, giants, humans, and a great Being, are his “ancestry” – that everything that appears separated and different, are in fact one.¹⁷⁰ My position is similar to that of Steinsland; I believe the st. 29-44 form a logical part of the revelations.

In the “*Svípdagsmál*” and in the *Hyndluljod* we are met with goddess-figures in a role very similar to that of the giantess Maidens in the previous chapter. Freyja’s goddess-hood is unquestionable, she is counted among the most powerful and high-ranking *ásyniur* – goddesses - in Ásgard. However, she was not originally an *ásynja*. Like Gerdr,

¹⁶⁸ Heide, 1997, p. 160

¹⁶⁹ Larrington, 1996, p. 253, Simek, 1996, p. 169

¹⁷⁰ Steinsland, 1991, p. 244-251

she entered *Ásgardr* from another tribe. Freyia's tribe is the *Vanir*, whose origin is unknown. Just as the perpetual enmity between the *Aesir* and the giants, there used to be enmity between the *Aesir* and the mysterious *Vanir*. Just as Freyr tried to "buy peace" (*frid at kaup*¹⁷¹) with Gerdr's clan, the giants, by inviting Gerdr as his wife to *Ásgardr* and to subsequent goddess-hood,¹⁷² the *Aesir* try to buy peace with the almost victorious *Vanir* through an exchange of hostages. Among the hostages from the *Vanir* is Freyia and her family. Freyia teaches *seidr* - the art of the *völur* - to Ódinn, and is a *blotgydja* - a sacrificial priestess/goddess. The truce between Freyia's people and Ódinn's also results in the creation of the mead of poetry with its subsequent need for a quest to retrieve the mead from the giants as told in the story of *Gunnlöd*. As Näsström has shown, sources independent from that of Snorri regard Freyia as a wife or concubine of Ódinn.¹⁷³ Snorri, who neatly systematizes the divine world, regards Frigg as Ódinn's wife, while Freyia is married to "someone called *Ódr*". Most scholars assume that *Ódr* is Ódinn,¹⁷⁴ and that Frigg and Freyia at some point in history were one and the same goddess, *Frija*.¹⁷⁵ Snorri relates how *Ódr* suddenly disappeared, and that Freyia was left behind weeping, much the same way as *Gunnlöd* was. Indeed, there is also a story of how Ódinn, gone traveling, left his wife Frigg for so long that she took other husbands.¹⁷⁶ Freyia's story does not finish with passive weeping either, for she started to travel the world wearing different shapes and names, leaving behind her tears of pure red gold everywhere she went.¹⁷⁷ In fact, as Näsström has pointed out, Freyia's name is actually a title, not a name, meaning "Lady", much in the same manner that a great god may be called simply "the Lord". Through comparative analysis of features and characteristics, Näsström has shown that the great "Lady" may hide behind a large number of female deities, even norns and giantesses (see ch. 3.4).

One part of the Ódinn-Freyia relationship is particularly interesting and puzzling. We are not told how the arrangement came to be, but the *Grimnismál* st. 14 reveals that Freyia,

¹⁷¹ *Skirnismál* st. 19

¹⁷² Snorri counts Gerdr among the goddesses in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes, 1987, p.59)

¹⁷³ Näsström, 1998, p. 89-91

¹⁷⁴ Simek, 1996, p. 250, Näsström, 1998, p. 90

¹⁷⁵ Ellis-Davidson, 1998, p. 10, Näsström, 1998, p. 136, Simek, 1996, p. 94

¹⁷⁶ *Ynglinga saga* 3, Gyldendal, 1944, p. 4

¹⁷⁷ *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes, 1987, p. 30)

residing in the ninth world, receives the dead souls of the *einherjar* – the chosen dead. She decides which of the *einherjar* (one-harriers) shall sit in her beautiful hall of friendship, and which shall go on to Ódinn’s *Valhöll* to become eternal warriors in service of the gods. Significantly, she shares the *einherjar* with Ódinn - not the other way around. It is clearly Freyia and not Ódinn who is in control of the choice. This information links Freyia to the valkyries on one side, since they are the spirits who hover above the battle-field choosing who shall fall and taking their souls with them to *Valhöll*. The *Grimnismál* information, which is repeated by Snorri in the *Gylfaginning*, makes it natural to assume that the valkyries were as much maids of Freyia as of Ódinn, since they must have taken the souls to the goddess first. On the other side, the information above also links Freyia to Hel, the giantess who receives the dead, and who rules in nine worlds. Other sources also establish Freyia as a mistress of death, such as the girl of the saga who cries out that she will not eat until she “sups with Freyia”, meaning that she will starve herself to death.¹⁷⁸ (See app. VI for Snorri’s information about Freyia).

5.1: FREYIA - LEADING THE WAY TO VALHÖLL

As remarked above, Freyia would receive dead souls, keep some for herself in her serene and beautiful halls of the ninth world, and send others on their way to Ódinn’s *Valhöll* – the Hall of the Chosen. Just how this happened is not known, but the *Hyndluljóð* may give an indication. The poem begins with a speech which sounds rather like an invocation (see app.VII). The goddess, Freyia, is trying to wake up her “sister”, her “girlfriend”, Hyndla, who lives in a rock cave. We learn that it is “the darkest of darkness itself”, and that Freyia wishes to ride to *Valhöll* and to the holy shrines. Freyia asks Hyndla to saddle one of the wolves of her stables and ride with Freyia and her choice of steed, a great boar.

Hyndla of the rock cave, the perfect image of a giantess, does wake up, but she sneers at Freyia’s request. It is not a boar that Freyia is riding, it is a man in boar-shape. Her “boar” is really Óttarr, Freyia’s *verr* – lover or husband. Even so, argues Freyia, Óttarr has always believed in goddesses, and colored red the altars of sacrifice until the rock

¹⁷⁸ *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Lie, 1970, p.188

turned to crystal. Thus, he has behaved in a manner which deserves help and attention. His wish is to have his “heritage”, namely the gold of *Valland* – the Land of the Chosen. He has wagered this gold with a certain *Angantyr*, and now he is in dire need of counsel about his lineage.

The fact that Óttarr is presented as a devout worshipper of goddesses seems to convince the giantess. She and Freyia dismount from their respective steeds, the wolf and the boar, and sit down to count up Óttarr’s “ancestral lineage”. Hyndla starts by counting up the lineages of great men and women, of the gods, of the giants, of the *völur* and the *vitkar* (wisards). Throughout her rhythmic account, she keeps asserting that “all are your kinsmen”, addressing Óttarr as “the ignorant”, “the one who has never been away from home” (*heimski*). Eventually, Hyndla reveals the greatest of secrets: That there is one being greater than all of those accounted for, born by nine giant maidens. This being, which we know to be Heimdall (“the Illuminating World”¹⁷⁹), encompasses everyone else. Finally, Hyndla reveals some of the reasons behind the end of the world which is to come and indicates a new beginning.

When Hyndla has sung her song of sacred ancestry, Freyia asks Hyndla to give the “ale of memory” (*minnis aul*¹⁸⁰) to Óttarr so that he can remember her words “on the third morning” when he and *Angantyr* shall reckon up their lineage. Hyndla, however, refuses, saying that she wishes to sleep, and tells Freyia to run off into the night like the goat Heidrún runs with the rams. In the next stanza, she repeats the comparison of Freyia and Heidrún, adding that Freyia runs wildly about full of desire, and that many are those who have run about her skirts. The stanzas appear insulting, and Freyia responds that she will surround this place with the fire of troll-women (*elldi of ividiu*¹⁸¹) and that Hyndla will never come out unburned. Hyndla responds that everybody wishes to save their lives, but that the ale Freyia serves to Óttarr is full of poison. Freyia has the final word, declaring

¹⁷⁹ Simek, 1996, p. 135

¹⁸⁰ *Hyndluljod*, st. 45

¹⁸¹ *Hyndluljod*, st. 48

that the giantess's words of bad luck shall have no effect, that Óttarr shall drink the precious drink (*dyrar veigar*¹⁸²), and that all gods shall help him.

5.2: Structural Elements in *Hyndluljod*

The “vision quest theme” of the *Hyndluljod* is apparent in the allusion to Óttarr's previous sacrificial activity, which led the goddess to appear and help him. We may not know what kind of effect blood sacrifice may have been expected to have on its practitioner, but it is not unlikely that it could induce a state of mind open to the supernatural powers. This is possibly shown through the fact that Óttarr in some way or other actually becomes the sacrifice. The sacrifice is followed by his descending into the underworld in the shape of a boar. The boar was sacred to the *Vanir*, usually associated with Freyr. One of Freyia's names, *Syr* (sow), however, also associates his sister with pigs. The pigs were important sacrificial animals. They were considered very powerful – in the *Hyndluljod*, st. 38, we hear that Heimdall was strengthened by the blood of the sacrificial boar, together with the power of the earth and the sea. I find it likely that Óttarr represents the sacrificial boar on its way to the realm of the dead. This element links Óttarr to Ódinn, who sacrificed himself in order to obtain the knowledge of the runes of fate, powerful spell-songs and a drink of Poetry Stir.

The vision theme must be that Óttarr's activities cause the goddess to appear, changing him into a steed for herself.

The descending theme is obviously when Freyia rides Óttarr the boar into the darkness of darkness itself, where she wakes up the maiden of the rock cave and ask for her help. The utter darkness, the sleeping giantess and the wolves that she rides are all features of the realm of the dead.¹⁸³

¹⁸² *Hyndluljod*, st. 50

¹⁸³ See passage about Ódinn's and Hermodr's underworld journeys in ch. 4.4, and about giantesses riding wolves in ch. 4.1

The trial theme is not as clear as in the previous examples. Ódinn is directly faced with giants such as Suttungr and Baugi, whom he has to overcome in cleverness, as well as a mountain which is not easy either to enter or to escape from. Skírnir has to overcome barking dogs and a fence of fire, and the threat of the giant Gýmir is alluded to. In Óttarr's case, the fence of fire is mentioned, but only as Freyia threatens to surround Hyndla with it at the end of the poem. From other sources we know that Freyia indeed was surrounded by high walls, even if it is not mentioned in this poem. The trial takes a different form: Óttarr's wish is to get to *Valhöll* (st. 1) and to have the gold of *Valland* (st. 9), the hall of- and the land of the Chosen Dead, but the gold of that realm is being wagered with a person called *Angantyr*. Steinsland assumed that Angantyr is Óttarr's opponent as future king.¹⁸⁴ I take a different standpoint, based on the information that Óttarr's main aim is, in the poem, stated to be *Valhöll*, not kingship. *Angan* means "pleasure", and "*tyr*" is a word for "god". The "god of pleasure" is Óttarr's primary opponent and challenge on his path to the hall of the Chosen, and may only be overcome through knowledge of esoteric lore that identifies Óttarr with every kind of being in the universe, ultimately revealing that they are all one. It is not uncommon in the history of religions for spiritual insight and liberation to be placed in opposition to the pleasures of the material world. Only through the knowledge of the underworld presided over by the giantess-*volva*, the lady of rocks and wolves, darkness and wilderness, and, crucially, through the drink that makes him capable of remembering what he has learned on the "third day", may Óttarr have a chance in the wager.

The second trial is to obtain the knowledge from the reluctant giantess, who is persuaded to chant her sacred lore, but not to give him the important mead of memory. We are closing in on the theme of the Ódinn-Gunnlöð story again: how to get to the mead. Only through the love and care of the Maiden will that be possible. That, through sacrifice and devotion, Óttarr had already achieved.

¹⁸⁴ Steinsland, 1991, p. 256

The “Maiden theme” surface in the fact that Ottarr is Freyia’s *verr*, which means man, lover or husband, and in Freyia’s declaration that she will offer Ottar the precious mead, the mead of memory.

5.3: Ogress versus Goddess – the Life and Death Opposition

At the end of the poem, Freyia and the giantess stand out against each other: the giantess who, although being the very source of sacred knowledge, can only offer destruction and forgetfulness, promises death and accidents, whereas the goddess promises the drink of memory and the help of all divine beings. In fact, Freyia personifies the alternative to what Hyndla represents, surrounding the ogress of death with a magical fire and offering a drink that makes the hero capable of remembering what he learned in the underworld while “dead”, in the shape of the sacrificed boar. Like Brynhild the valkyrie tells the ogress of death to “sink” so that she may be with Sigurd in eternity¹⁸⁵, Freyia puts fire to the giantess who can promise “few fair things” (*fer thu fætt af mer fridra kosta*¹⁸⁶). The opposition between Freyia and Hyndla is also symbolized in their steeds. Hyndla rides a wolf, the wolf being, in Norse mythology, always a representative of the giant, destructive forces, the devouring, hungry animal. Freyia, however, rides a boar, the pig being the very symbol of wealth, hunger satisfied, and sacrificial power. In the opposition, we are reminded of Gerdr’s choice: life as an ogress in Hel or life as a divine bride in Ásgard. Freyia, it seems, represents the latter option.

Steinsland has interpreted Óttarr’s quest for his heritage as a part of kingship inauguration – the king must prove that he has a royal, divine and giant lineage.¹⁸⁷ Although, as we have seen in ch. 4, the initiations presided over by the Maiden figure may include initiation to kingship, I believe that the “heritage” in question is of a more general religious nature, implied in the intention of going to *Valhöll* or *Valland* stated in st. 1 and st. 9, as well as in the teachings and the challenge of *Angantyr*. Óttarr needs

¹⁸⁵ See ch. 6.7

¹⁸⁶ *Hyndluljóð*, st. 46

¹⁸⁷ Steinsland, 1991, p. 256-259

good lessons to have his “heritage”- the heritage of all creatures in the universe. Here, only the knowledge of sacred inter-connectedness with all things appears sufficient to overcome the rule of pleasure. This, apparently, is necessary to claim the treasures of the Land of the Chosen Ones, the alternative to extinction in death.

5.4: MENGLÖD - THE GREAT MAIDEN

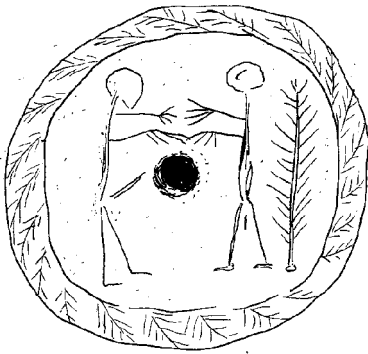


Image on Bronze Age burial lid, Denmark

...**hon** hér rædr ok rikir hefir
eign ok auðsölum.¹⁸⁸

...**she** is the lord here, and has in her dominion
lands and rich halls.

The poem *Gróagaldur* begins with “the son” (*sonr*) standing by the gates of death invoking his long dead mother *Gróa* (“to grow, thrive”)¹⁸⁹ who had told him to wake her up if in need (see app. VIII). The “son” explains his mission: his stepmother has sent him on the “unknown way” (*er kvæmtki veit*) to meet Menglöd.¹⁹⁰ *Gróa* declares that the way is long and heavy, and that the soul will have to yearn for a long time, but if he obtains the goal of his quest, luck will follow.¹⁹¹ The son asks his dead mother to chant good *galdur* (charms) for him, to save her child (*bjarg thu, modir! megi;*) for he fears that he will never come back from the quest, being too young.¹⁹²

Gróa, then, chants nine charms for him. If he feels that he is carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders, he shall shake it off, himself leading himself (*sjalfr leid thu sjálfan thik*). If he feels insecure and unsafe, *Urdr*, the oldest norn, shall lead the evil away from his paths. If he encounters fatally dangerous rivers, they shall turn away from his path

¹⁸⁸ *Gróagaldur* st. 7-8

¹⁸⁹ Simek, 1996, p. 120

¹⁹⁰ It is the “stepmother”-theme which has been the strongest argument for understanding “*Svipdagsmál*” as a “fairy-tale”. However, the theme only exists in the *Gróagaldur*, which means that, read separately, the *Fjölsvinnsmál* has no stepmother-theme at all. Even if read together, the stepmother theme is also to be found in the *Skirnismál*, a poem most accepted as a rendering of true myth.

¹⁹¹ *Gróagaldur* st. 1-4. Menglöd being mentioned in the poem makes the link to *Fjölsvinnsmál* quite obvious.

¹⁹² *Gróagaldur* st. 5

towards Hel, and he shall walk on dry land. If he meets enemies on his way, their minds shall be turned towards friendship. If he is fettered and bound, Gróa's "release-galdr" shall open up any lock and loosen every knot. If he encounters a storm at sea, the winds and waves shall calm down for him. Cold shall not bite him. A dead "Christian" woman on the misty, dark roads shall not harm him. Eventually, when he encounters the great, spear-strong giant, the son shall have wit and eloquence enough in his heart and his mouth to face the giant. In the end, Gróa advises him to never himself seek bad luck, for then harm will not find him, and to remember the words of his mother - if he pays attention to her words, honor and luck will follow.¹⁹³

Gróagaldr ends there, and we have to turn to *Fjölsvinnsmál* for the continuation.¹⁹⁴ The boy has, mysteriously, arrived at the "outer settlements" (*utan garda*) of the giants and thurses. Suddenly someone asks him what kind of troll he is, standing in the outer courts, moving back and forth around the "fatally dangerous fire" (*hættan loga*). The one who asks is the giant *Fjölsvidr* - "Very Wise" or "Much Knowing" - undoubtedly the "wise giant" Gróa mentioned in her last charm. (*Fjöl* also indicates "magically versed").¹⁹⁵ Very Wise is not particularly hospitable, telling the boy to return along the "slippery roads" (*urgar brautir*).

The boy, however, declares that he is eager to meet again the pleasure of his eyes, and that he believes he will enjoy staying in the golden hall (*gullna sali*). Very Wise asks him who he is, and the boy replies that his name is Wind-Cold, son of Spring-Cold, son of Many-Cold. Both coolness and the wind are symbols of death. Wind-Cold asks who the lord is who has in his dominion the lands and precious halls: Very Wise declares that it is the maiden Menglöd who is the lord, as quoted above.¹⁹⁶

Now follows a long dialogue between our hero Wind-Cold and the giant Very Wise. Wind-Cold asks and Very Wise answers, but Wind-Cold has to know how to question.

¹⁹³ *Gróagaldr*, st. 6-16

¹⁹⁴ This is if we understand the *Fjölsvinnsmál* as a continuation of the *Gróagaldr*, as a "Svípdagsmál"

¹⁹⁵ Simek, 1996, p. 84, Heide, 1997, p. 8. Ström, 1954, and most others, translated *fjöl* in the *Reginismál* as "trollkunnig" -versed in magic, sorcery.

¹⁹⁶ Translations of name in Heide, 1997, p. 8, and in Norrøen Ordbok

During this conversation, we learn about Menglöd, her realm, and the trials that Wind-Cold has to overcome to be reunited with the Maiden. After realizing that the trials may not be overcome at all, Wind-Cold asks if there is anyone so blessed that he may sleep in Menglöd's arms. Very-Wise answers that only *Svípdag* may be so blessed: “The Suddenly Dawning Day”.¹⁹⁷ This is when Wind-Cold reveals his true name: he is Svípdag - and is allowed to enter the hall of Menglöd as her long lost husband. He is welcomed with a speech about the long years of yearning caused by his absence, which he explains: He was kept away by the words of *Urdr* – fate - and by the winds that led him along cold roads. The allusions to fate, winds and cold roads again bring death to mind. Menglöd gives Svípdag the “kiss of welcome” and declares that they will be together for all eternity.

5.5: The Structural Elements of “Svípdagsmál”

The vision quest theme is represented in the first stanza of *Gróagaldr*, as Svípdag, described as the “son”, invokes his mother at the doors of death (*daudra dura*). The invocation bears some resemblance to the invocation Freyia uses to wake up the sleeping giantess in the underworld.¹⁹⁸ We could imagine that the “doors of death” where he performs the invocation are by the wise woman's burial mound. This idea is strengthened by the fact that Gróa declares that she is standing on an “earth-fastened stone” while she sings her charms. Sitting on a burial mound was in fact a known practice in Norse society, a part of the practice of *utiseti* and a means of obtaining secret knowledge from the beyond (see ch. 3.1).

The vision theme manifests itself as the long dead woman rises from her grave and speaks to her son. The waking of a dead woman is known from another Eddic poem, namely the *Baldrs draumar*, where Ódinn, using “charms of the Chosen Dead” (*valgaldr*), wakes up a dead *völva* buried to the east of the gates of Hel. The *völva* then reveals the meaning of Baldr's dreams of bad omens. One could imagine that a similar

¹⁹⁷ Simek, 1996, p. 307. Heide, 1997, points out theories of other possible origins of the name on p. 26-27, particularly a link to *Svipall*, one of Ódinn's names. In fact, the revelation of Wind-Cold's real name in the poem comes only in st. 47

¹⁹⁸ See appendix VII and VIII

scene took place before the ancient *völva*'s chanting of her prophecies in the *Völuspá*, since the *volva* in that case is said to “sink” at the end of her speech. Similarly, the *völva* of *Baldur's draumar* wishes to “sleep”. There is indeed some similarity to Hyndla, who also is woken as she sleeps in the center of the realm of the dead, and who also states a wish to go back to sleep. Hyndla is considered a giantess, yet parts of her speech is counted as the “short *Völuspá*” and are indeed quite similar to the “real” *Völuspá*. Hyndla could be said to be both a giant representative of Hel, and a dead or sleeping *völva*. Gróa's joint giant- and *völva*- identity is strengthened by an account of Snorri's in the *Gylfaginningr*, where a *völva* called Gróa chants *galdr* to heal Thorr's leg. This *völva* is the wife of a giant. It is perhaps more than a ghost that Svípdag is approaching. It is possible that Svípdag's “mother” is a *völva* of mythical, giant origin. It is possible that she represents a mythic figure of many names who has been largely ignored by scholars. I am suggesting the existence in the Norse cosmology of a sleeping giantess-*völva* who encompassed many more characters than just Gróa: such as Hyndla, Hyrrokkin, Hel and the *völva* who was raised among giants before the beginning of time, as revealed in the *Völuspá*. Even if my idea of Gróa should be proven wrong, we may maintain that the vision theme is present when a creature from beyond the grave, a supernatural creature with knowledge of charms and of the way to reach Menglöd, manifests herself and speaks to the living.

The descending theme is present both in the *Gróagaldur* and in the *Fjölsvinnsmál*. Standing at the doors of death and speaking to the dead is in itself a feat of “descent” to the world of the dead. In the *Fjölsvinnsmál*, Svípdag is discovered in the “outer settlements” (*utan garda*), which indicates the giant world (such as far-away *Utgardr*) and, more specifically, the realm of the dead, as we shall argue in the following chapter.

The trial theme is described in more detail in the “Svípdagsmál” than in any of the other poems. In the *Gróagaldur*, we learn that Svípdag's main aim is to reach Menglöd, just as we learned, in the *Hyndluljóð*, that Óttarr's main aim is to reach *Valhöll*. In both cases, an old wise woman of the world of the dead is approached for the purpose of seeking teaching and help. Svípdag expresses fear, anguish and doubt, he is too young, it is too

far, the stepmother who forced him onto the quest was “harm-wise” (*lævisa*). (In fact, the stepmother theme was subtly present also in the *Skírnismál*, where the prose introduction declares that it was Skadi, Freyr’s stepmother, who made Skírnir approach Freyr in order to help him. Skadi could be said to be “harm-wise”, since her name itself means “harm”.¹⁹⁹) Gróa agrees with Svípdag that the way is long and difficult and that he will have to yearn for a long time –quite like Freyr, who yearned for his beloved during nine insufferable nights. But Gróa’s nine charms will help Svípdag on his way. Nine charms were also “given” to Ódinn by his maternal uncle before the drinking of the precious mead in *Hávamál* st. Gróa’s charms, which she “gives” to the lad, could, as Motz suggests, be describing an initiation ritual. As we saw above, the charms do indicate obstacles on the way and how, both through cunning and magic, to conquer them. The charms make him ready for the big trial, namely the meeting with the giant warden and the impenetrable walls of the Maiden. During the conversation with the giant, we learn so much about the realm of the Maiden that there is not space to discuss it in detail within this study. As Eldar Heide has argued, the poem provides crucial information about the Norse cosmos.²⁰⁰ Svípdag learns about these important secrets and about how to enter Menglöd’s hall. It turns out, through a long dialogue, that it is downright impossible, no matter what he tries to do. It is only when it occurs to the young man to ask who is so blessed that he may sleep in Menglöd’s soft embrace that the solution reveals itself. It is only the right one, the one that had already been married to the “great maiden” (*tjodmæra*),²⁰¹ the one whose name is Svípdag, who may be so blessed. Once Svípdag remembers his true identity as Menglöd’s husband and calls himself by his true name, the Maiden herself lets open the doors and receives her long lost beloved with a kiss. I use the word “remember” because, until then, the poems themselves do not reveal his real name. Only after having studied the realm of the Maiden, where the *Mimameidr* – “tree of memory” - is situated, Wind-Cold declares himself to be Svípdag, long “lost” on slippery roads. In st. 5, Wind-Cold declares that he would like to see “again” the halls of Menglöd, meaning that he obviously remembers them from before. Yet in the beginning of the *Gróagaldr*, the boy shows no signs at all of remembering that he has actually been

¹⁹⁹ Norrøen Ordbok

²⁰⁰ Heide, 1997

²⁰¹ *Fjölsvinnsmál*, st. 35

married to the Menglöd whom he is about to seek. An important part of Svípdag's trial, it seems, is to remember his true identity – the husband of the Great Maiden.

The Maiden theme is revealed through the marriage and love between Svípdag and Menglöd. The offering of a drink could be present in Menglöd's name, if we should choose to follow Jacobsdottir's interpretation of the name as "Invitation to a Drink". Moreover, as we will argue in the following chapter, Menglöd is sitting at the foot of the world tree, where the three wells of the world are situated. The tree is called *Mimameidr* here, the "Tree of Remembering", and alludes to the giant Mimir, who drinks from the well that contains intelligence and memory about all the worlds, that Ódinn coveted so much.

5.6: The Realm of the Dead in *Fjölsvinnsmál*

The realm that Svípdag is visiting is described in great detail, and we only have room to discuss the most essential features that may identify the realm of the dead. Menglöd's hall is surrounded by a terrible-looking fence with a horrific gate. The gate is called *Thrymgjöll* – "the Loud Resounding One"²⁰² - a name which immediately brings to mind the Resounding bridge and river on the way to Hel.²⁰³ Every traveller who tries to move it will be stuck to it. The image of being stuck to something in the giants' realm is common: In the *Gylfaginning*, Loki is stuck to the walls of the hall of the giant Geirröd, caught and put into a chest. In the poem *Haustlong*, cited in the *Skáldskaparmál*, Loki finds himself stuck to the giant in eagle's disguise after trying to hit him. In both cases, Loki is faced with certain death. As we argued in ch. 4.4, the giant in eagle's disguise is a representative of death. Menglöd's gate is made by "the three sons of *Sólblindi*" – the "Sunblind" – as we know, the sun is not seen in *Niflheimr*.²⁰⁴ The symbol of death is present in the nature of that gate: a world that one gets stuck in forever when once entered, a world where there is no way out.

²⁰² Simek, 1996, p. 330. From *thrymr*, m. "loud noise", and *gjöll*, f., "Resounding noise"

²⁰³ See ch. 4.10

²⁰⁴ *Voluspá* st. 41

The fence is called *Gastropnir*, which according to Heide means “Guest-Strangler”.²⁰⁵ According to Simek, the - *ropnir* part of the word could really be – *rofnir* – to be torn asunder. Both meanings make sense: any “guest” in the realm of the dead may expect to die. That fence is made of the limbs of Leirbrimir, who could be identified with Ymir from whose limbs the gods fashioned the world itself.²⁰⁶ If this is the case, it may follow that the fence is the fashioned, divinely ordered word itself, or at least made of the same substance. In *Baldrs draumar*, a point is made of how Ódinn avoids the gates of Hel. In the story of Hermodr in the *Skáldskaparmál*, a similar point is made of how Hermodr’s horse Sleipnir jumps over the gates of Hel without touching them.

The image of the death-realm is completed by the fact that two ferocious, barking dogs are guarding the gate. We recall from ch. 4.10 that barking, blood strained dogs were a feature of Hel’s and of the giantess Gerdr. The dogs names are *Gifr* and *Geri*, both names meaning “Greedy”.²⁰⁷ Although they are dogs, their names are those of wolves and giantesses, a combination often found in connection with death.²⁰⁸ These two dogs will, as long as the world last, guard the *eilifu* -the “eternal ones”.²⁰⁹

Menglöð’s grandfather is *Svafrthorinn*, from *svafr* – which is derived from *sofa* – to sleep, and *thorinn*, which means courageous, brave.²¹⁰ I find this family relation

²⁰⁵ Heide, 1997, p. 8

²⁰⁶ *Leir-* means clay or something made out of clay. The concept of a *leirjötunn* – “Clay-Giant”- existed in the Norse vocabulary. *Brimir* probably comes from *brim*, n., (or *brimi*, n.) which means the movement of waves against land, although *brimi*, m., means “fire” (Simek, 1996, p.) *Brimir* is an alternative name for *Ymir* in the *Voluspá* stanzas 9 and 37; as we know, the world itself was fashioned out of the limbs of Ymir. Yet, Snorri in the *Gylfaginning* claims that *Brimir* is the name for the room where the gods hold a drinking feast. Simek, however, believes that Snorri has misinterpreted and that *Brimir* is the name of the giant who owns the hall where the gods drink (ibid, p.) The hall is explicitly said to be a *bjórsal* –an “ale-hall”, in the *Voluspá* 37. If *Brimir* is identical with *Ymir*, there is to my view no contradiction in his identity also with the great drinking hall – it is not difficult to imagine the world itself as a great banquet for the gods.

²⁰⁷ Simek, 1996, p. 108, 106

²⁰⁸ Such as the giantess riding a wolf who pushes Balder’s funeral ship out to sea, another giantess riding a wolf who signals the death of Helgi Hörvardsson, or the giantess who gives birth to wolves that will destroy the world in the *Voluspá*. Einar Sveinsson (1975, p. 29-37) pointed out the fact that the dog-names belonged to wolves and giantesses.

²⁰⁹ Actually, the text says *ellifu*, which could only mean “eleven”. Bugge (1867), p. 345, suggests that it must really be a form of *eilifr*, which means “eternal”. Mortensen Egnund (1993), p. 217, translates into “møyane” – the “maidens”.

²¹⁰ Simek, 1996, p. 305: Simek believes that the meaning of *svafr* as “sleep” hardly makes sense and that it really should be *Svefnthorn*, “sleeping thorn”. In my opinion the name as it is makes sense if understood as “Courageous Sleep(er)” insofar as sleep may be understood as “death”. This will be discussed in ch. 6.

important because the valkyries, as we shall see in the chapter 6, are connected to similar names or family relations with names indicating sleep, which, ultimately, indicates death.

Finally, during the dialogue between Svípdag and the wise giant, we learn that one woman keeps the weapon that will make it possible to enter Menglöd's hall. Her name is Sinmara, the "pale mare" (as in nightmare)²¹¹, and she is the consort of *Surtr* ("Acidous") who will one day be the death of Freyr. The old "pale giantess" keeps the *Lævateinn* locked with nine iron locks. As Heide has suggested, Sinmara and Hel are the same.²¹²

5.7: The Realm of the Giants in the *Fjölsvinismál*

Inside the forbidding and well-guarded fence, there is a great tree, spreading out over the land. It is called the *Mimameidr*, "the tree of Mimir". *Mimir* is the giant under the world tree who drinks from the well of memory and wisdom with the Resounding Horn. If we remember Suttungr's association both with the realm of death and with the giant Mimir in ch. 4.4, this location of Mimir's tree is quite interesting. The tree is described in stanza 20 in a way that makes it possible to identify it with *Yggdrasill* -the world tree itself. Few know from what roots it has sprung, and what is eating it up slowly. The same kind of description is found in the *Grimnismál* 34 and 35, about the *Yggdrasill*. The *Mimameidr* has a special attribute: its seeds may be thrown on a fire, to relieve women sick during pregnancy, and in order to see what has been hidden. It is generally acknowledged that *Mimameidr* is another name for *Yggdrasill*.²¹³ In the top of the *Mimameidr*, a rooster is seated, all glowing with gold – in the top of *Yggdrasill* the bird is an eagle. In Norse poetry, there is nothing unusual about calling one thing by a different name, and the eagle in particular is a bird often named by other kinds of birds.²¹⁴ The allusion to Mimir is very interesting. According to Snorri, the World Tree has three different roots, each reaching into a well. One is situated in Hel's realm, a well infested with serpents, the origin of the rivers of the world. Another is situated in the realm of giants, where the well is guarded by the giant Mimir. In that well intelligence, wisdom and memory of all the

²¹¹ Simek, 1996, p. 285

²¹² Heide, 1997, p. 173-174

²¹³ Ström, 1993, p. 97, Simek, 1996, p. 216.

²¹⁴ *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes, 1987, p. 137)

worlds is contained. The third root is situated in the realm of the gods. The well at the third root is called after its guardian, Urdr, the oldest of the norns. From this well, the *Urdarbrunnr*, Urdr waters the tree so that it may stay eternally green. From this well, ultimately, the dew that falls into the valleys of the world is derived. By this root and this well, the maidens Urdr, Verdandi and Skuld, the three original norns, shape the lives of the living. The gods and goddesses hold court and counsel by the well of the norns, and the rainbow bridge between the worlds leads there. The water has an obvious healing, rejuvenating, renewing and transformative function: it keeps the World Tree from rot and decay, and it is “so holy that all things that come into that well go out as white as the membrane called the skin that lies round the inside of an eggshell”.²¹⁵ There are many more norns, who have their origin first in Urdr, then in the trio of Urdr, Verdandi and Skuld. These norns visit everybody who is born, follow them through their lives and shape their fate.²¹⁶

In the *Fjölsvinnsmál*, we are subtly presented to each of the three realms (with their attached roots and wells with different functions), only they are not separated from each other in the manner Snorri describes. They seem to be aspects of each other. We have pointed out the features of Hel and the features of the giant world through the situation in *utan garda*, its giant warden and the tree of Mimir. Now we must turn to the world beyond the ferocious fences, where the ferocious dogs will guard the “eternal ones” for ever, the world below the tree of Mimir.

5.8: The Realm of the Maidens

In the *Fjölsvinnsmál* 9 and 11, the maiden’s realm is said to be “sown with the gods” (*med godum sáat*).²¹⁷ What is interesting about this is that we have already learned that we are in the Outer Settlements - the giants’ realms. This does not seem to affect the divinity of the realm. Menglöd is described as “sun-bright” and named as a “great maiden” (*tjodmæra*). She is surrounded by nine maidens at the foot of the great tree.

²¹⁵ Faulkes, 1987, p.19

²¹⁶ See ch. 3.1

²¹⁷ *Fjölsvinnsmál* st. 9

There she sits, completely still, in utter silence.²¹⁸ Her brightness is in accordance with that of the other maidens: Gunnlöð's golden throne, Gerðr's gold and arms that shine across the world, Freyja's fiery necklace and golden tears, and as we shall soon see, the immense rays and shine that unfailingly accompany the valkyries. Luminiscence, brightness and goldenness may have been common ways of describing women in a flattering manner, yet it is also very much a part of the structure of the "Maiden-mythology" and should not be overlooked. The placing of Menglöd and her maidens at the foot of the World Tree is important: norns, goddesses of fate, are situated at the foot of the world tree Yggdrasil.

Menglöd's hall is golden, situated within the *Gastropnir* fence, and is surrounded by flames. Its name is *Hyrr* – "The Shining One",²¹⁹ shivering on the tips of swords and knives. About its beauty people may only know through its fame – indicating how unusual it is to go there – and live to tell of it.

There is a hill there called the *Lyfjaberg* – "the Mountain of Medicine", and there, Menglöd sits.²²⁰ The Mountain of Medicine may be climbed by any sick woman, and she will be healed from life-long sorrows. By the knees of the dreaming lady, nine maidens sit together, and their names are *Hlif* (Life) and *Hlifthrasa* (Life-Seeker), *Thjodvarta*, *Björt* (Bright), *Blid* (Amiable), *Blidr* again, *Frid* (Peace), *Eir* (otherwise known as a goddess of healing and medicine) and *Örboda*.²²¹ These maidens will save anyone in need, only they sacrifice to them.

As I was arguing in the previous section, *Fjölsvinnsmál* presents us to each of the three worlds. The world of the maidens and the Great Maiden by whose knees they sit is divine. It is placed at the top of a mountain, and at the same time at the foot of the World Tree. It is a place of healing, love and help. It is situated in the midst of the world of the

²¹⁸ *thruma* in st. 35 is usually translated as "dreaming", that is, Menglöd is dreaming. But the word actually means "to remain quiet or silent on one spot", as Heide, 1997, p. 121 points out.

²¹⁹ Simek, 1996, p. 170

²²⁰ *Hyfjaberg* is recognized as a mistake for *Lyfjaberg*, "Mountain of Medicines", usually translated in Norwegian as "Lækjedomsberget" (Mountain of Healing) since, as Heide, 1997, p. 10, points out, the actual meaning of medicine in Norwegian makes it sound like it is a pharmacy.

²²¹ Translation taken from Norrøn Ordbok and Simek, 1996

dead, which is situated in the midst of the world of the giants. At the same time, it offers bright and loving promises. Näsström has argued that the norn Urdr is identifiable with Freyia. Ström identifies Urdr with Hel, and Hel with Freyia.²²² *Hyrr* could be a representation of Freyia's beautiful after-death realm, her "Field of People" and "Hall of Friendship". That places *Hyrr* in the ninth of the divine realms. However, if *Hyrr* is rather, or at the same time, a presentation of the norns' realm, then it is situated in the center and court of *Ásgardr*, the divine realm.

In the story of *Menglöd*, we, for the first time in this study, see a collective of maidens surrounding one "great Maiden". The group could represent the *brúdkonur* – the women accompanying the bride while she awaits the groom, and thus an emphasis on the marriage motif in the story. Yet I find in the image a striking resemblance to the valkyries who travel in troops led by one who is more splendid than all the others. This is a link to the next chapter, where we shall discuss the valkyries. It is also worthwhile, here, to recall the theories of Ström and Näsström of a "Great *Dís*" emerging from a collective of *dísir*, a *dís* identified, ultimately, as the "Lady", the Great Goddess Freyia.

5.9: Summary and Conclusions to ch. 5

...at *thu ert komin, mögr! til minna sala.*²²³

...That you have returned, man, to my halls!

In this chapter, I have argued that Freyia and *Menglöd* are identical with each other and moreover that, through their functions and the structure of their stories, they may be identified with the giantesses *Gerdr* and *Gunnlöð* as represented in ch. 4.

The structure of each myth is similar to each other. It is possible to detect a pattern of themes such as 1) the Vision Quest Theme, 2), the Vision Theme, 3) a Descending Theme, 4) Trial Theme, and 5) a Maiden Theme. Each theme in each myth resembles the other themes of the other myths on a fundamental level.

²²² Ström, 1954

²²³ *Fjölsvinnsmál*, st. 49

The Maidens are placed in a protected spot within a realm that is identifiable as *Niflhel*. However, the Maidens represent an alternative to the bone-sucking monsters of Hel's extinguishing realm. The alternative is represented by how Ódinn with the help of Gunnlöd dug his way out of the mountain of the giants and returned to the divine realm with the precious mead inside himself, taking upon himself the features of death, eagle and serpent, and using them to escape, flying, to freedom. It is present in the choice to which Gerdr is presented, either to be a wife of the gods in possession of their most sacred treasures, or to be an ogress gaping behind the gates of Hel. It is also alluded to in the grove that the winds do not reach – the winds, as we know, originate in the realm of the dead, with the all-devouring eagle Corpse Swallower. It is present in the contrast between Hyndla, who offers poison and forgetfulness, and Freyia, who offers love and memory which may lead the hero to the heavenly afterlife in *Valhöll*. Finally, it is present in the contrast between Menglöd's eternal love on the Mountain of Medicine and in the pale giantess Sinmara, who keeps the only weapon that could make it possible to get past the ferocious guard dogs, locked behind nine iron locks.

Each poem is different, but, as I see it, complementary. Each fills in gaps of information about the “Myth of the Maiden with the Mead”. *Fjölsvinnsmál* adds very much to our understanding of the Norse cosmos. I argue that the three roots and the three wells of the World Tree may be seen as three aspects of the same reality. This alludes to my argument in ch. 4.5: namely that Ódinn learns by all the three wells simultaneously. The same appears to be the case with *Svípdag*.

The poems also reveal a kind of “love and loss story” within the myth. It could appear that Ódinn was the first to approach the Maiden, who was then a giantess and who, after the marriage and Ódinn's betrayal, was left behind in the giant's realm. Gunnlöd's weeping for Ódinn is reflected in Freyias weeping for Ódr and in Menglöd's longing for her long lost husband. Ódinn appears to regret his treatment of Gunnlöd, Freyr longs himself sick for Gerdr, and Menglöd's returning husband declares that she was not the only one to suffer, that they have been separated by cold winds and slippery, dark paths, all symbols that may belong to the realm of death. There are several indications that

Svípdag, through the workings of the mortal realms, has forgotten his original relationship to Menglöd. A theme of original union and subsequent loss and forgetfulness seems to be present in the myth of the Maiden. Óttarr faces the danger of forgetting everything he learned in the Underworld unless Freyia and all the gods help him. In *Fjölsvinnsmál*, the World Tree is called the Tree of Remembering, and Svípdag acts as if he only has a vague memory of the golden halls in the beginning, recognizing both the Maiden and himself only at the end of the poem. The climax of his lessons may be this fact: that he and the Maiden have always been united in their souls. We are reminded of the image of the reincarnated hero and the valkyrie who is either reincarnated or only sleeps until her re-born hero finds her and wakes her up – a theme we shall discuss in the next chapter.

6: The Reincarnating Valkyrie



Detail on standing stone
Early Viking Age, Got-
land, Sweden

“There are still others [among the goddesses] whose function is to wait in Val-hall, serve drink and look after the tableware and drinking vessels.(...) These are called valkyries. Odin sends them to every battle. They allot death to men and govern victory. Gunn and Rota and the youngest norn, called Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern killings.(...)”²²⁴

In the *Gylfaginning*, as quoted above, Snorri Sturluson gives the image that has had great influence on our image of the valkyries – that of serving maids in *Valhöll* and supervisors over battle. They ride to battle, choosing who shall win and who shall die, thus their title, *valkyria*, from *val* – the “chosen” or the “slain”, and *kjosa* – “to choose”. They are the “Choosers of the Chosen (Slain), the “maidens of Ódinn”, and they bring the dead souls to his warrior’s paradise, *Valhöll* – “Hall of the Chosen (Slain)” after battle. In *Valhöll*, warriors are served mead by the valkyries, mead milked from the goat *Heidrún* who stands on the roof of *Valhöll*, eating from the great tree there, the *Læradr*. The way the tree is described by Snorri renders it obvious that the tree is no other than the World Tree itself.²²⁵ So the mead that the valkyries give the One-Harriers to drink is drawn directly from the tree of life itself, the very same tree that the oldest norn waters every morning. The water comes from the well that makes anyone who bathes in it come out shining white (see ch. 5.7 about the transformative power of *Urdr*’s well). Moreover, the goat’s

²²⁴ Faulkes, 1987, p. 31

²²⁵ The tree can be no other than the world tree, for alongside the goat *Heidrún*, a stag also stands and feeds from the same tree, and its horns drip a liquid into the well of *Hel*, *Hvergelmir*, which we know to be located at one of the roots of the world tree. Text in Faulkes, 1987, p. 33

name means “bright rune”.²²⁶ Runes (*rún*, f.pl. *rúnar*) were a kind of letters used by Germanic peoples, including the Vikings, but their name means “secret” or “hidden knowledge”.²²⁷ It seems logical that the secrets contain the hidden knowledge of destiny, since they were first inscribed by the norns, mistresses of fate.²²⁸ Both Ström²²⁹ and Näsström²³⁰ regarded the norns, valkyries and other *dísir* as creatures more or less identical to each other; while the norns allot fate in general, the valkyries seem more specialized for the fate of battles. Snorri counted the youngest norn, Skuld, among the valkyries, as quoted above. In the *Hyndluljóð*, the goat Heidrún is compared to Freyia, a comparison I believe is far from irrelevant. The comparison is presented in the guise of an insult referring to Freyia’s promiscuity. However, if we consider what Heidrún actually represents, we realize that the “insult” provides information about Freyia that reaches far beyond moral judgement about the goddess’s sexual transgressions: The goddess is compared to the goat whose name means “bright hidden knowledge”, from whose udders flow the sacred mead of the valkyries. This mead has its ultimate beginning in the well of Urdr, whose waters will transform anyone who bathes in it into something new, shining and transparently white, whose waters will keep the World Tree itself from rot and decay. Heidrún is the transmitter of that mead, and Heidrún is comparable to Freyia. Now, Näsström has argued that Freyia may be called “the Great Valkyrie”²³¹, and indeed, Snorri describes how she rides to battle.²³² In the *Grímnismál*, st. 14, Freyia is described as the receiver of *einherjar*, the dead souls, and it is told that “she chooses the slain (chosen)” every day, keeping half to herself and sending half to Ódinn. The exact words used are *val hon kyss*, *val* and *kyss* (*kjosa*) being the same words that compose the word *valkyria*. As we shall see in this chapter, the valkyries operate in a collective of maidens, but only one “Great Valkyrie” stands out. It is not impossible that we are meeting Freyia in one of her many guises, and we shall see that the reincarnating valkyrie fits neatly into our now well-known “Maiden-mythology”.

²²⁶ From *heidr* (adj.) “clear”, “bright” (Norrøn Ordbok)

²²⁷ Norrøn Ordbok

²²⁸ *Völuspá* st. 20

²²⁹ Ström, 1954

²³⁰ Näsström, 1998, p. 177-178

²³¹ *Ibid*, p. 164

²³² *Gylfaginning*, see appendix VI

As mentioned in ch. 2.3, the different Heroic Poems are of different ages and origins, yet the editors of the Edda, perhaps basing themselves on common tradition, must have linked them together so as to form part of a very long family saga. As Alv Kragerud has argued, it seems likely that the way the editors presented the poems was in accordance with tradition. According to Kragerud, the primary motif of the Helgi poems is to convey the pre-Christian belief in reincarnation. The reincarnation theme has been largely ignored by scholars or dismissed as a mistake by the editor(s) of the *Codex Regius*. Kragerud, however, argues that the poems were made in order to show just how reincarnation occurs. The notes of the editor(s) function as integrating parts of the legendary material that the poems are based on. There is no reason to assume that the editors were “wrong” when they explained the poems they were writing down; on the contrary, the editor(s) belonged to a traditional chain of *frodi* – “knowledgeable” - men and women among whom the legendary traditions behind the poems were still very much alive. There is little reason to believe that the idea of reincarnation was a late addition from the Christianized editor(s) rather than a pre-Christian concept. Besides, Kragerud argues that the idea of reincarnation is confirmed in the poems themselves, the last stanza of the poem of Helgi Hjörvardsson conveys the idea that he will “come back” to the world, and the valkyrie recognizes her hero in the poem of Helgi Hundingsbani.²³³ In my opinion, the theme of reincarnation is important in the poems, but more important is the way the the poems convey an underlying “Maiden-mythology” behind these apparent sagas of love and revenge. From my point of view, the reincarnation theme is a natural part of the theme of the Maiden with the Mead. We have seen how Svípdag “returns” to his Maiden after having been separated for a long time due to “winds” and fate: possibly, they have been separated by the death of the former Svípdag. How the very young Svípdag could have been married to the Maiden a long time ago could perhaps be explained through the idea of reincarnation transmitted by the Heroic Poems.

²³³ Kragerud, p. 3-54

6.1: A Summary of the Maiden-stories in the Heroic Poems

The poem *Helgakvída Hjörvardssonar* relates the stories of King Hjörvarðr and of his son Helgi Hjörvardsson and their relationship to supernatural women. Hjörvarðr hears rumours about a beautiful maiden called Sigrlinn in a far off country, and sends his earl's son Atli out to woo her for him. Atli spends a winter with the girl's father, king *Svafnir*, but has no luck. Later, Atli retires to a grove, where a bird speaks to him, demanding shrines, temples and sacrificial cattle in return for its help in obtaining the maiden. The story proceeds with Atli taking the king up on a mountain from where they may look down into *Svávaland*. Next, Atli takes the king with him to a river's edge, where the king falls asleep. In the middle of the night, Atli crosses the river into *Svávaland*, finds the maiden Sigrlinn accompanied by another maiden, Álof, hidden in a house guarded by a giant eagle which is "Earl Fránmarr" in disguise. He is the father of Álof. Atli kills the "earl" in eagle's shape and returns to Hjörvarðr with the maiden Sigrlinn as a bride to the king, and her friend, earl Fránmarr's daughter Álof, as his own bride.

Hjörvarðr's and Sigrlinn's son grows up fair-looking, but no name will stick to him, he speaks little and socializes less. He is sitting on a *haugr* – a (burial) mound when a company of nine valkyries rides past. The leader of the valkyries, *Sváva*, gives him a name, Helgi, which means "the sacred one"²³⁴, and incites him to seek a special sword which lies on the "Islet of Victory"²³⁵ in order to rule the "Fields of Shining Light"²³⁶. This first meeting makes Helgi intent on becoming a warrior, finding the sword that *Sváva* revealed to him. *Sváva* is said to protect him in battle. Later, Helgi kills a giant called *Hrod marr* – "Ocean of Non-Peace",²³⁷ and then another one called *Hati* – "Hate". While still in *Hatafjord*, the "Fjord of Hate", the ship is threatened by an ogress, *Hati's* daughter with Rán called *Hrimgerðr*, "Frosty Enclosure". All the men are asleep except

²³⁴ Larrington, 1996, p. 114

²³⁵ *Sigarsholmr*

²³⁶ *Rödullsvollir*

²³⁷ *Hrodi*, m. means enmity, lack of peace, quarrel, storm. *Hrodaligr* –disgusting, enemy-minded. But *hrodr* means honorable, good fame. *Marr* means "ocean"(Norrøn Ordbok). In the light of *Hrod marr's* giant successor *Hati*, I found the interpretation "unpeace" of the *hrod-* in his name logical. "Hate" and "Unpeace"...

Atli the earl's son, who accompanies Helgi and his men. Atli engages the ogress in a duel of words in which is revealed that Atli was castrated in the past and that only the protection of Sváva and her valkyries are preventing the ogress from drowning the ship. As Helgi lives happily with his valkyrie wife, who continues "riding air and sea", Helgi's older half-brother Hedinn meets an old giantess riding a wolf, using serpents as reins. The ogress asks Hedinn to accompany her, but he refuses. The ogress warns him that this will have a terrible outcome. Later, Helgi is killed by the *Frekasteinn*, "the Rock of Greed".²³⁸ He asks Sváva to marry his brother Hedinn, who loves her and who had even sworn to have her, but she flatly refuses. I agree with Kragerud that the last stanza of the poem does not reveal that Sváva accepted Hedinn as husband. On the contrary, the last stanza is Helgi's promise of returning to avenge himself. The prose ending of the poem declares that Helgi and Sváva were reborn.

The first and second poems of *Helgi Hundingsbani* relates the story of the valkyrie Sigrún and Helgi, son of Sigmundur Volsung. The two poems complement each other. The first relates how a norn at the birth of Helgi fastened a special fate-thread northwards, bidding it to hold forever. Sigmundur's son grows up a prince and harsh warrior, and manages to break the "Peace of Frodi" (*Frodafridr*). According to Snorri, the *frodafridr* was a time long ago, of peace and plenty, of friendship and happiness, when no one stole from nor killed one another. A golden ring could lie forever in the fields without no one picking it up, so little greed was there, and no one bothered with revenge. This was under the reign of king Frodi, whose name could mean "wisdom".²³⁹ As Helgi is busy killing and winning battles, nine maidens approach from the "Mountains of Flames" and the "Fields of Heaven" while lightning and rays of fire surround them.²⁴⁰ Helgi asks them if they would like to come to him, but the leader of the valkyries, Sigrún, declares that she has no time to lose drinking beer with men when there are more important matters to attend to. She asks him to save her from her hideous suitor by killing him as well as defeating her own family, who is trying to force her into the undesired marriage. During

²³⁸ *Freki*: "the greedy one". *Frekleikr*, m., "greediness" (Norrøn Ordbok)

²³⁹ *Frodr* – "wise", "knowledgeable" (Norrøn Ordbok)

²⁴⁰ *Logafell*, from *loga* (ad.) "flaming", "burning" or *loga* (f.), *log* (n.) "torch", "light". *Himinvangar*: "Fields of Heaven" (Norrøn Ordbok)

the journey to the battle-place, Helgi is assisted by his half-brother, Sinfiötli, who in a discourse somewhat similar to that of Atli and Hrimgerdr leads a duel of words with one of the representatives of the enemy, in which it is revealed that Sinfiötli was castrated in the past. In the battle that follows, Sigrún and her “shield maidens” descend and protect their hero, who wins.

The second poem relates the same story in a different way. Helgi is said to be named after Helgi Hjörvardsson. The first meeting between the valkyrie and Helgi takes place after he has been to battle, while feasting on raw meat with his warriors. Sigrún from *Sefafjöll* approaches on horseback, and we are told that she is Sváva reborn. She asks Helgi what he is doing, and he tries to explain the bloody sight of himself and his men. Sigrún declares that she already knows, and that she has not been far away. When she saw him, she recognized him as Helgi. Declaring her love with a kiss, she asks him to kill her unwanted suitor, and the same events take place as in the first poem. However, the second poem allows the story to continue after the victorious battle. Helgi and Sigrún meet on the field of slain men after the battle of *Frekasteinn* – the “rock of greed”, where most of Sigrún’s kinsmen lie dead. Helgi is dozing off, dead tired, beneath the *Arasteinn* – “Eagle’s Rock” - when she embraces him. The two are married, but Sigrún’s brother avenges his kin by slaying Helgi with Ódinn’s spear in the *Fjöturlundr*, the “Grove of Fetters”. He rides to Sigrún on the *Sefafjöll* to tell her the news. Sigrún meets the dead Helgi in his burial mound, where the two drink “the precious mead” before sleeping together in the grave. Helgi goes on to *Valhöll*. The couple is said to be reincarnated as Helgi and Kára as told in *Káraljod*, a poem that is lost to us. However, the *Grípisspá* identifies the valkyrie Sigdrifa as the maiden “who has slept since Helgi died”, and her hero is Helgi’s younger brother, Sigurdr, born after Helgi’s death.²⁴¹

The prose interpolation in the Poetic Edda called *Frá Dauda Sinfiötla* tells the story of Sinfiötli’s death, and then proceeds with how Sigurdr was born. Sigurdr’s father Sigmundr, who was also father to Helgi Hundingsbani and Sinfiötli, dies in battle with the Hundings, his late son’s enemies. Sigurdr’s mother marries again and Sigurdr grows up with her and his step-father’s family.

²⁴¹ Näsström, 1998, p. 164 also identifies Sigdrifa and Brynhildr with the former valkyries

The *Grípisspá* relates how the young Sigurdr approaches his maternal uncle Grípir, who “ruled countries and was wiser than all and could see the future”. Grípir is persuaded to tell Sigurdr his whole fate, and the poem functions as a “synopsis” of the Sigurdr-saga.

Reginnsmál relates how the young Sigurdr meets Reginn in the stables of his step-grandfather. Reginn is a dwarf, but he is wise and has a hard *hugr* (mind, intent, soul), and he knows about sorcery. He fosters Sigurdr and teaches him. He tells Sigurdr about the story of the red gold of the gods, taken from the dwarf *Andvari* and now kept by the great serpent *Fafnir*. Reginn declares that the gold is his father’s heritage, and asks Sigurdr to help him slay the serpent, who is Reginn’s own brother. *Fafnir* is really a giant, and his name means “embracer”. Reginn forges a sword called *Gramr* –“Anger”, which bites through anything. Sigurdr declares that he has to do his duty as a prince and son before he can go on Reginn’s quest, and Reginn follows Sigurdr as he sets out to avenge his father against the Hundings. On the sea journey they are overtaken by a storm. In the midst of the storm they see a man standing quietly on a rock in the ocean. As he enters the ship, the storm quiets. The man presents himself with several names indicating that he is really the god Ódinn, and gives Sigurdr important counsels. At the end of the poem, Sigurdr slays the Hundings and Reginn praises his warrior’s deeds, much in the manner of a royal bard.

Fafnismál relates how Sigurdr slays the great serpent *Fafnir* with the aid of Reginn. As the serpent dies, he reveals secrets, answers questions and gives counsel to Sigurdr. Sigurdr comes back from the slaying apparently a new man. When Reginn tries to praise his warrior’s deeds, Sigurdr replies that many men are courageous who never reddened their sword in another man’s chest. Reginn is alarmed by Sigurdr’s new attitude, but, still regarding Sigurdr as his apprentice, orders him to roast the heart of *Fafnir*. Reginn drinks *Fafnir*’s blood and goes to sleep while Sigurdr works with the roasting. But as he is roasting the heart, a drop of blood falls down on his finger, which Sigurdr licks, and suddenly he can understand the speech of birds. The birds tells him that Reginn will betray him, and that he should take the gold of *Fafnir* and ride up to the *Hindarfell* – the

Mountain of Obstacles²⁴² - where a beautiful shield maiden – a valkyrie - is to be found. She is sleeping because Ódinn punished her for choosing differently than he wished. Sigurdr slays Reginn, gathers the treasures of the serpent on his horse`s back, and rides on.

Sigrdrifumál relates how Sigurdr rides up on the Mountain of Obstacles, where the earth trembles and flames reach up to the sky, a place few would have the courage to enter. Sigurdr, surrounded by the shine of the gold of the gods, rides through a wall of fire. Inside the fire-fence is a hall made of shields, and as Sigurd enters the hall he finds a warrior in full armour. Taking off the helmet of the warrior, he realizes that the warrior is a woman. The armour has grown into her body, and Sigurdr has to cut her loose. As she wakes up, liberated from the armor, she speaks to Sigurdr and asks him to present himself. He explains who he is, and she declares that she has been sleeping for a long time, and that everybody has suffered for that reason. Ódinn caused her deep sleep with his *galdr*. She presents herself as Sigrdrifa, a valkyrie, and continues her tale of her disagreement with Ódinn about the fate of some warriors which led to her imprisonment. Sigurdr then asks her to teach him wisdom from all the worlds. Sigrdrifa responds, praising day, night, gods, goddesses and the holy earth, and praying for eloquence, intelligence and healing hands in life. After the prayer, she offers him the *minnis aul* – the drink of Memory, declaring that the ale is filled with power, manliness, sung songs and blessing words, good *galdr* and runes of pleasure. She proceeds to counting up all the kinds of runes that Sigurdr needs to know and how to use them. The counting evolves into the tale of how Ódinn found the runes, where they came from, how he held the head of Mimir and spoke wise words, and how he cut the runes loose to flow into the worlds of gods, elves, the *vanir* and humankind. In the end, Sigrdrifa asks whether Sigurdr would like “speech or silence” from her. He has a choice, but fate is still laid out for him. Sigurdr declares that he is not afraid of knowing his fate even if it is death, and chooses her wise words and counsels as long as he lives. Sigrdrifa grants him eleven pieces of advice about behavior.

²⁴² From *hindr*, n.: “Obstacle”? Turville-Petre, 1975, p. 199, interpreted the meaning as the Hind-Mountain, from *hind*, f.: “hind”.

The poems that follow relate the events around Sigurdr's death from different angles. Only the *Grípisspá* (mentioned above) gives a coherent summary of why Sigurdr had to die. The story may also be found in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* and in the *Volsunga Saga*. Apparently, Sigurdr had sworn oaths to Sigrdrifa, but as he rides down from her mountain, he forgets all his oaths and his great love for the valkyrie. Unwittingly breaking his oaths, he is married to beautiful Gudrun, whose mother knows more about Sigurdr's past than he now knows himself. The mother, Grimhildr, asks Sigurdr to help his brother-in-law, Gunnarr, to seek the maiden Brynhildr. It becomes clear that Brynhildr is just another name for Sigrdrifa. Sigurdr takes Gunnarr up onto the Mountain of Obstacles, but Gunnarr's horse refuses to enter the fire, and Sigurdr's horse refuses to carry Gunnarr. This is when Sigurdr changes shape with Gunnarr, so that he can enter the hall of the Maiden in the shape of another man. He sleeps with Brynhildr as if she were his mother, for three nights, with an unsheathed, poisonous sword between them. Later, Brynhildr comes as a bride to king Gunnarr, but as she discovers how she has been tricked into marrying an unworthy man, her revenge is terrible, ending with Sigurdr's death. Brynhildr takes her own life.

The *Helreid Brynhildar* tells the tale of how Brynhildr rides into Hel, where she is met by an ogress. The ogress calls Brynhildr the "goddess of gold" from *Valland* and asks what she is doing in this dark realm when she ought to be weaving in her own. It becomes clear from the ogress's hostile words that Brynhildr is not supposed to be in that rocky realm and that she has acted wrong causing the death of men. This is certainly a puzzling remark about a valkyrie, who is supposed to cause death through choosing. The only explanation for this is to reconsider our idea of the valkyrie. Sigurdr is residing in Hel because of Brynhildr, and that is wrong. His relation to the valkyrie should have had a different outcome. Brynhildr defends herself by explaining the cause of her actions, laying the blame on her brother "Atli" and on the "wise king", who tricked her sisters and herself by stealing their bird hides a long time ago. It would seem that Ódinn hides behind the characters of Atli and the "wise king". At the end of her speech, she declares

that she has been underestimated and that she will follow her heart, being with Sigurdr for all eternity. She tells the ogress to “sink”.

The *Oddrúnargrátr* tells the tale of how Brynhildr’s “younger sister”, Oddrún from *Hlésey* – the “wind shielded island” - fell in love with Gunnarr after the deaths of Sigurdr and Brynhildr. She offered the drinking horn to Gunnarr, but her relations opposed the match and Gunnarr could not fight them. As he is taken captive by her brother Atli, Gunnarr is thrown into a pit of poisonous serpents. He manages to keep the serpents back by playing on a harp with his toes (his hands are bound). The music is so beautiful that everybody who hears it has to weep, and the tones reaches far away to the wind shielded island, where it is finally heard by Oddrún. Oddrún rides the fastest she can to save her beloved, but just as she reaches the pit, her brother’s mother, an ogress, has taken the shape of a serpent, crawled into the pit and given Gunnarr the fatal bite.

6.2: The Vision Quest Theme

...the Great Taiga, the Heart Taiga
I do climb it, I do scale it
spirit recluse, spirit recluse
my staff tingles, the tender pine
Have you not seen Alan’s *mothers*
- the ancestors of our shaman...
...born in new shape
born with miraculous power
oh mothers mine, oh mothers mine...²⁴³

Sitting in a certain **grove** (*lund nokkurn*), as Atli does when he speaks to the bird, may certainly be part of a “vision quest”. Groves were sacred to the Germanic peoples, often used as shrines and sanctuaries. The sanctity of the grove is ancient. Even as early as 80 A.D., the Roman historian Tacitus, whose accounts about the Germanic tribes is considered one of our most reliable Antique sources,²⁴⁴ testified that groves were holy places, to which the Germans applied “the name of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence”.²⁴⁵ Sacrifices and rituals took place there, and no one could enter unless bound with a cord. The grove, Tacitus asserts, is the center of their

²⁴³ Siberian shaman song. A Taiga is a snowclad mountaintop. Diószegi, 1968, p. 264-265

²⁴⁴ Näsström, 1998, p. 17, Simek, 1996, p. 309

²⁴⁵ Mattingly, 1970, p.109

whole religion, from time immemorial. It is regarded as the cradle of the people and the dwelling place of the supreme god. Later on, Tacitus reveals how the shrine of Nerthus, Mother Earth, was situated in a grove on an island. Groves appear quite frequently as mythical places in Eddic poetry. Sitting in a grove, especially when the result is communication with a bird who demands shrines, temples and sacrifice in order to assist in an important matter, would appear to me an obvious example of a vision quest.

Helgi Hjörvardsson sits on a *haugr* – a **mound** - when nine valkyries ride past, changing his fortune forever. Sitting on a burial mound was a way of gaining wisdom and inspiration in the Viking Age.²⁴⁶ In the Poetic Edda, it could appear that Ódinn is sitting on a burial mound when he sings *galdr* to wake up a dead *völva* in *Baldrs Draumar*, and and that Svípdag does the same when he invokes his dead mother in *Gróagaldr*. Mounds could, for example, contain elves, who would heal in return for sacrifice.²⁴⁷ Burial mounds and mounds in general were places of sacrifice to powerful ghosts or elves.²⁴⁸ In the *Volsunga Saga*, king Rerir sits on a mound when the valkyrie *Hljod* appears in the shape of a crow to give him an apple of fertility from Ódinn as an answer to a prayer to Frigg. In this case, Helgi receives the vision of nine supernatural maidens while sitting on a mound. He probably sat there in order to obtain a vision.

Atli took his king up on a **mountaintop** in order to see *Svávaland*. Sigurdr slew the serpent on a mountain and encountered the valkyrie on another. Mountains are often associated with female supernatural beings. Gunnlöd was said to dwell within the deadly rock-layer much like other giantesses such as Hyndla, the ogress in *Helreid Brynhildar*, and in the poem *Grottasöngur*, two giantesses reveal how they grew nine winters within the mountain. Menglöd sits in silence on the Mountain of Healing whereas Sigdrifa sleeps on the Mountain of Obstacles. Sigrlinn shows the way to the Shining Hills, and Sigrun's dwelling is *Sefafell*, another mountain, and she descends from The Mountain of Flames. According to Motz, mountains and rocks were associated with a kind of

²⁴⁶ Davidsson, 1990, p. 155, Hedeager, 1999, p. 9, Solli, 2002, p., Ström, Motz,

²⁴⁷ Ex.: *Kormáks saga*, Davidsson, 1990, p. 156

²⁴⁸ Näsström, 2001, p. 89-91

Germanic priesthood, as well as with the world of the dead.²⁴⁹ In another Scandinavian tradition, the Saami, the idea of a Sacred Mountain was central within the lore of their shamans, and especially connected to the residence of helping spirits. It was also considered a dwelling for the dead.²⁵⁰ In Siberian shamanism, mountains – or the “master spirit” of the mountain - play the role of initiating shamans.²⁵¹ It is indeed a “sacred mountain” (*hélog fioll*) that Sigurdr ascends in his quest for the serpent’s gold and the Maiden, as shown in *Fafnismál* st. 26. *Svávaland*, watched from the mountaintop, belongs to a realm of death, as we shall see in ch. 6. and is an Other World. To climb a mountain in order to “see” such a realm must be counted as a vision quest.

Atli also takes his king to a **riverside** where he sleeps while Atli crosses it. The river is a border to *Svávaland* which, as already remarked, is an Other World. In Norse Mythology, rivers frequently function as borders between realms. In *Frá Dauda Sinfiötla* we meet the river as a border to the world of the dead. Sleeping by a river in order to cross it in the dark of night, entering the Other World must be seen as a vision quest.

Hjörvarðr has to **sacrifice** cattle in order to obtain his goal. The sacrifice helps Atli find his way to the Maiden. Helgi Hundingsbani also butchers cattle, eating the meat raw when the valkyries arrive. We remember how Óttarr sacrificed to Freyia before descending into the Other World. Sacrifice may be counted as a means of obtaining the necessary vision and power to enter the Other World.

Helgi rests beneath the *Arasteinn* – “Eagle’s Rock”- when the valkyrie appears. Knowing the symbolic significance of the eagle as a force in the realm of the dead (see ch. 4. 4), we may detect the deeper meaning of such a place. Another place where Helgi meets his Maiden is while staying the night in *Brunavág*. *Bruna* means “edge”, so the name could be translated as “the Bay of the Edge”. Both places could signify a very special place or even state of mind where the hero is present at the borders of the Other World. These events could also be counted within the vision quest theme.

²⁴⁹ Motz, 1983, p. 7, 87-91, 95-97, 100-104

²⁵⁰ Bäckman, 1975, p. 88-91, Hultkrantz, 1992 (b), p. 140, Pollan, 2002, p. 29, Steinsland, 1992, p. 320

²⁵¹ Diószegi, 1968, p. 55

Finally, the **drinking of a mythical serpent's blood** in order to induce visions, as Reginn and Sigurdr do, may also be regarded as a vision quest. The serpent, who reveals knowledge about the other worlds and about fate, is obviously a powerful creature, and so is its blood and heart. Reginn falls asleep after drinking the blood, and we do not know what kind of effect it has on him. According to Ström, it was assumed that a person who could change shape or travel with the soul would be asleep or dreaming when the *hugr* – the “free-soul” - detached itself from the body (see ch.3.1). That the blood would have some kind of magical effect seems obvious: Sigurdr's immediate reaction is to understand bird's speech and communicate with birds who can tell him what is hidden and advise him in his actions.

6.3: The Vision Theme

The vision theme is closely tied to the vision quest theme, and some of the visions have been alluded to in the previous chapter. **Speaking birds** may be counted as a vision, as in the cases of Atli and of Sigurd. So is the vision from the top of a mountain into another world. Helgi Hjörvardsson obtains the **vision of nine valkyries**, with one more splendid than all the others, who speak to him and reveal, among other things, his name and the location of a magical sword. Helgi Hundingsbani sees three times nine maidens ride down from the heavens, surrounded by lightning and flames, their byrnies spattered with blood: “southern red goddesses”, directing his future. On another occasion, the leader of these shield maidens approaches him while he is dozing off, embracing and kissing him. In all the poems, emphasis is laid on the immense rays and luminiscence that surround the valkyries, comparing them to the sun. Sigrdrifa's hall is surrounded with flames reaching up to heaven, and her mountain shines with rays of light. They ride through air and sea, descending from the heavens. We are reminded of Freyr's vision of the Maiden with the arms that lights up sea and mountain, the golden chair of Gunnlöd, Freyia's fiery necklace and golden tears, and the Shining Hall of sunbright Menglöd. Gerdr and Menglöd have that in common with Sigrdrifa: their residence is surrounded by a fence of fire. Gunnlöd and Freyia are also surrounded by immense obstacles.

6.4: The Descending Theme

Atli spends a winter with king *Svafnir*, Sigrlinn's father. *Svafnir* literally means "the One Who Puts to Sleep". Simek believes that this is a poetic way of saying "death".²⁵² *Svafnir* is one of the names of Ódinn,²⁵³ as well as the name of one of the serpents that live in the well of Hel.²⁵⁴ The Hel-serpent *Svafnir* and Ódinn-*Svafnir*, the god of the dead, contribute to the idea of king *Svafnir*'s realm as a realm of the dead. King *Svafnir* and Sigrlinn's realm is called *Svávaland*. *Sváva* also means "to Put to Sleep", indicating the same thing as the name of the king: death. In "Sleep-Putting Country", Atli encounters a giant in eagle's disguise. In ch. 4.4, we discussed the symbolic significance of such a creature, identifying it with the eagle Corpse Swallower who dwells in the northernmost reaches of Hel.

Sigrún dwells on *Sefafjöll*. *Sefa* means "to calm down" or "have mercy". It could also be a genitive form of *sefi*, m., which is a synonym for *hugr*, m., that is, the soul, intent, will, mind, desire or thought of a person. The name of Sigrún's dwelling is either "Mount Calm Down", which would be in accordance with the above *Sváva* and *Svafnir* (calming down being associated with falling asleep), or "Soul's Mountain". Sigrún's relationship to death becomes clear when she meets Helgi in his burial mound, comparing herself to the "hungry hawks of Ódinn", and describing in detail the lovely sight of hot and bloody corpses. She talks as if she was about to devour her beloved (see app. X). Sleeping in his dead arms further indicates death, since, in the Norse sources, death is often depicted as an embrace of the mistress of the dead.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Simek, 1996, p. 305

²⁵³ *Grimnismál*, *Hrafnsmál* and the *thulur*.

²⁵⁴ *Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes, 1987, p. 137

²⁵⁵ Steinsland, 1992, p. 320-322

The Great Serpent

“The serpent is linked with the giants, and with the snakes that inhabit the world of death and are its symbols. Beside him we must set the fiery dragon of northern mythology, emerging from the depths of the earth, from rocks, caves, or burial mounds of the dead.”

Hilda Ellis Davidson²⁵⁶

Last but not least we must consider the great serpent that Sigurd slays, whose blood makes it possible for him to understand the speech of birds and to cross the Mountain of Obstacles. *Fafnir* means “the embracer”, indicating that he is coiling himself around something – in this case the gold of the gods and of the dwarf *Andvari*. Now what other great serpents do we know in the Norse mythology? Two come immediately to mind: the serpent mentioned several times already; the *Nidhöggr* and the *Midgardsormr* (“World Serpent”, also known as the *Jormundgandr*).²⁵⁷ *Nidhöggr* dwells in the well of Hel, *Hvergelmir*, together with uncountable snakes, as described in the *Völuspá*:

(...) *thar saug Nidhöggr nái framgengna*
*sleit vargr vera (...)*²⁵⁸

(...) There Nidhogg sucks the bodies of the dead
wolves tear the corpses(...)

We meet Nidhogg again in the last stanza of the same poem:

Thar kemr inn dimmi dreki fljugandi
nadr fránn nedan frá Nidafjöllum;
berr ser i fjödrum –flygr völl yfir-
Nidhöggr nái
*Nú man hon sökkvask*²⁵⁹

There comes the dark dragon flying
the shining serpent up from Dark Moon Mountains
carries in its feathers – flying across the earth -
the corpses, Nidhogg
Now she will sink down

We know, then, of *Nidhöggr*, that it sucks the corpses in *Niflheim*, and that it carries corpses in its feathers as it flies across the earth in the new world after Ragnarok.

Of the *Midgardsormr* –“World Serpent” - we know a bit more. It is the brother of Hel, goddess of death, and of the great wolf *Fenrir* (“Greed”). The serpent lies coiled around the ordered cosmos. As Heide points out, the *Midgardsormr* may appear not to be entirely destructive, in fact it might be the very bond that keeps the world together.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ Davidson, 1990, p.139

²⁵⁷ From *jörmun-* (a name for Ódinn) meaning “great”, and *gandr*, m. a name for the magic wand (cult staff) of witches and the *völur*, or meaning “sorcery”. Simek, 1996, p. 179-180, *Norrøn Ordbok*

²⁵⁸ *Völuspá* st. 38, 39

²⁵⁹ *Völuspá* st. 66

²⁶⁰ Heide, 1997, p. 107

Ellis Davidson establishes the Germanic fiery dragon as the “guardian of the burial mound”, “brooding over his treasure in a megalithic stone chamber inside a burial mound”.²⁶¹ The dragon in particular is associated with the graves of the dead, and Davidson points out that the fire-spitting dragon is a natural image of devouring death, swallowing up the dead body and its treasures with greedy fire. Although the dragon in Norse poetry is pictured as a great serpent, it is easy to recognize the dragon. Both in England and Scandinavia, the dragon-serpent came to be regarded as the guardian of the grave mound, watching over its treasures. The name *Nidhöggr*, she adds, means “Corpse Tearer”, leaving little doubt as to the image of the devourer of corpses. The serpent-dragon *Fafnir*, Davidson claims, is a typical example, and it has left its mark in the serpentine ornament and recurring snake-motif upon memorial stones raised over the dead. The snake as symbol of the world of the dead is as recurrent in the art as in the literature of the north. Like Davidson, I too believe that *Fafnir* should be seen in the light of the two monsters, *Nidhöggr* and the *Midgardsormr*. Both the World Serpent and *Fafnir* are pictured as coiled around something precious, the Earth and the gold of giants and gods. *Fafnir* meaning “Embracer” further strengthens the comparison. Both *Nidhöggr* and the World Serpent are related to death, the one by its dwelling place, the other by its brotherhood to Hel. The World Serpent seems to play yet another role – that of holding the known, ordered world in one piece. When Thorr tries to catch it in the *Hymiskvida*, the world shakes, and even the great giant Hymir is struck with terror, preventing the kill.

As with the eagle, the great serpents represent great cosmic figures related to the realm of death. Both figures are also crucial to the maintenance of the known world: the eagle creates the winds of the world, the serpent holds it together. Just like the eagle had to die so that Atli could take the maiden out of Put-to-Sleep-Country, the serpent has to die so that Sigurdr can find his maiden and release her from the spell of sleep. In addition, the killing of the serpent means a “killing” of the limits of the human world, represented by the serpent who with its body forms a frontier between the ordered *Midgardr* and the unknown *Utgardr*; thus numinous knowledge is revealed.

²⁶¹ Davidson, 1990, p. 159. About the serpents, p. 159-162

6.5: The Trial Theme

The heroes have to overcome the monsters of the Other World. We have already touched upon the significance of killing the serpent which opens the way to the Maiden. Sigurdr also has the wit to obtain knowledge from the dying monster. Just like the eagle is said to be exceedingly wise, the serpent reveals cosmic secrets when it is overcome. Atli has to kill the eagle to release the Maiden, which is the same theme as that of Sigurdr. Helgi Hjörvardsson has to defeat the giants of “Non-Peace”, Hate, the ogress “Frosty Enclosure”, and win a battle by the “Rock of Greed”. He fails the last test, but is reborn as Helgi Hundingsbani. This Helgi, however, breaks the “Peace of King Wisdom” in the beginning of his career. Later, he wins the battle of the Rock of Greed. He dies by Ódinn’s decree, however, but is united with his valkyrie bride in the grave and is allowed to enter *Valhöll*. Many of the “battles” could appear to have to do with proper conduct. Indeed, many of Sigdrifa’s important counsels have to do with right behavior, and Sigurdr has the rather “un-viking-like” realization that there is no need to kill to prove one’s courage. The two Helgis’ test of defeating “non-peace”, “hate” and “greed” quite speaks for itself. *Hrimgerdr* is a daughter of Rán, the mistress of the bottom of the sea, who makes people drown. That, and her name, which means “Frosty Enclosure”, certainly indicates death. Helgi, with the help of Atli, defeats what this ogress represents. He does die, but he is reborn, and later reunited with the Maiden and allowed an afterlife as a warrior for the gods. Defeating the ogress could represent an alternative to extinction in death. There are indeed more monsters in these stories that could be discussed, but the examples just mentioned should suffice to show that the hero faces trials of proper conduct and how to “trick death” through following the valkyrie who protects him.

6.6: The Maiden Theme

In each of the cases summarized in ch. 6.1, the hero is married to or loves the valkyrie. In Helgi Hundingsbani's, Sigurdr's and Gunnarr's case, the offering of mead is mentioned. Helgi receives the "precious drink" in the grave, and apparently drinks it together with Sigrún. Sigurdr receives the "memory drink" as a prelude to Sigdrifa's teachings about the runes, their use and their origin. The drink is mixed with the magical powers of charms, runes and songs. Sigurdr learns how to heal, how to help women in childbirth, how to calm storms, how to turn enemies into friends, how to speak eloquently, and so forth. Later he is given practical advice about how to behave, and the choice of listening to his valkyrie's counsel or not. In Gunnarr's case, the drink is just mentioned as a symbol of his amorous relationship to Oddrún. The Maiden theme is prominent in all the stories, and particularly detailed and informative in the *Sigrdrifumál*.

6.7: Ogress versus Valkyrie; the Life and Death Opposition

The ogress Hrímgædr declares that the only thing which saves Helgi and his men from drowning is the protection of the valkyries. Above, I argued that Hrímgædr with her "frosty embrace" was a representative of extinction in death. The valkyrie is the opposite. In the poem of Helgi Hundingsbani, the hero's forthcoming death is announced by an encounter with an ogress riding a wolf using serpents as reins. The opposition surfaces again in the *Helreid Brynhildar*, where Brynhildr encounters an ogress on the way to Hel. The ogress declares that Brynhildr has nothing to do in this realm, being from *Valland* – the Land of the Chosen – and a "goddess of gold", and besides, that she is pursuing another woman's man. The "other woman" would, in my opinion, not necessarily mean Sigurd's human wife, but Hel, to whom Sigurdr now belongs. However, Brynhildr, through eloquence, argues her way into Hel, making the ogress "sink" as she declares that she will be with Sigurdr for all eternity. It could appear that Brynhildr chooses to reside in Hel with Sigurd. However, the sinking of the ogress and the declaration could equally well mean that she actually saves Sigurdr from Hel. This idea seems to be strengthened by the case of Oddrún and Gunnarr. Oddrún dwells at *Hlésey*, the "wind

shielded island”,²⁶² where, we may guess, the winds of the eagle Corpse Swallower do not reach. Gunnarr has always been a weak man in the spiritual sense, unable to cross the fire of the valkyrie and letting another man do it for him, hiding the truth from everybody else until it leads to disaster. But his love for the valkyrie is sincere and wins him the love of the “younger sister” Oddrún. However, Gunnarr is unable to conquer her vicious kinsfolk. In the poems of the Helgis, we see that the valkyrie’s kinsmen must be regarded as the hero’s enemy, just as they are in the stories of Ódinn and Freyr. They are representatives of the hostile world of the giants and the forces of death. Oddrún, perhaps as a consequence of Gunnarr’s failings, is far away from Gunnarr when he is thrown into the snake-pit – the perfect image of devouring death if we recall the *Völuspá*’s description of Hel’s snake-infested well. When Oddrún hears the beautiful strains of his music, she rides as fast as she can, but not fast enough. It is too late now; Gunnarr has become the victim of the ogress of death.

The same sad theme is touched upon in the *Helgakvída Hjörvardssonar*. Hedinn, Helgi’s brother, meets an ogress mounted on a wolf, using serpents as reins. We have seen that such an ogress is the perfect image of Hel. Steinsland has suggested that Hedinn, when he refuses to walk with the wolf-woman, refuses initiation, for initiation takes you to the depths of death itself.²⁶³ I agree with this view; what Hedinn is refusing when seeing the horrible creature is the company and teachings of an ogress much like Hyndla, who taught Óttarr. This is also an explanation of why – and even an argument for - the disputed fact that Sigrún refuses Hedinn and decides to wait for Helgi’s reincarnation. The Maiden will only open her arms to the worthy, the initiated.

6.8: The three Worlds of Teaching

In chapter 4.5, I argued that Ódinn’s trials on the world tree encompassed not only his learning of runes, but also his learning of *galdr* by a wise giant and his union with Gunnlöd, who offered him the precious mead of wisdom, eloquence and poetry. His journey to Mimir’s well of wisdom must have been a part of the same scenario. I argued

²⁶² From *hlé* – place shielded from the wind. A dwelling of Aegir the sea-giant in *Skáldskaparmál*.

²⁶³ Steinsland, 1997, p. 146

that the three wells at which he learned – the well of Mimir, the well of Urdr (the runes were, ultimately, inscribed by the norns), and the well of Hel (Gunnlöd’s realm) - are really one and the same well, or aspects of each other. *Fjölsvinnsmál*, as argued in ch. 5.7 to ch. 5.10, could appear to confirm this thesis, since the three worlds beneath the World Tree – the realm of giants (the giant Fjölsvidr and the tree of Mimir), of the dead (barking dogs), and of the gods/norns (Menglöd and her maidens) - appear in one and the same setting, as if they were just layers wrapping themselves around each other. The *Sigrdrifumál* would appear to strengthen this thesis further. Here, the knowledge of runes is certainly combined with the offering of mead by the Maiden, and Óðinn holding Mimir’s head is mentioned in the same stanzas that describe his discovery and liberation of the hidden runes.

6.9: The Numbers Nine and Three

The number nine and sometimes the number three are mentioned throughout all the Maiden-stories of ch. 4, 5 and 6. The number nine is obviously important in Norse mythology and usually in connection with feminine entities. The *völva* of *Völuspá* simultaneously remembers nine worlds and nine giantesses (or troll-women) before the present World Tree rose from the ground. The *völva* Hyndla relates how nine giant maidens simultaneously gave birth to Heimdallr – the “Illuminating World”. Rán, the giantess ruler at the bottom of the sea, is the mother of the nine daughters of Aegir the sea-giant. In all these cases, the number nine is certainly in connection to giantesses.

However, the number occurs also in association with valkyries. In the poem *Solarljod*, st. 79, we even hear of the otherwise unknown “nine rune-carving daughters of Njördr”.²⁶⁴ Njördr is otherwise known as the father of Freyia. He resembles Aegir insofar as both are associated with the sea, and in the fact that he does not (originally) belong to the tribe of divine Aesir.

²⁶⁴ “*Hér ’ru rúnar, er ristit hafá / Njardar dætr nú*”. *Solarljod*, st. 76. The poem is a Norse, but Christian “visionary poem” (Näsström, 1998, p. 171) reflecting a transition period where pagan imagery still had a strong impact on poetry. Bugge, 1965, p. 357-370

In the Heroic Poems, the milieu is strikingly maritime. The heroes travel by and fight at sea and often fight sea monsters (such as *Hrodmar*, *Hati* and *Hrimgerdr*). Perhaps this is simply reflecting the Viking Age in which these poems were created. Yet as we have mentioned in the beginning of ch. 4, the ocean itself is often imagined as a realm of death, ruled by Rán, Aegir and their nine daughters.

It is interesting that the valkyrie Oddrún's dwelling is *Hlésey*. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Aegir is said to live on *Hlésey*, and even to have the name of *Hlé* himself – the Wind-Shielded. One could almost get the impression that the valkyries – usually nine in number – somehow have come to resemble the nine daughters of Aegir or are a different aspect of them. The association to the sea is obvious in the poems of the valkyries. Since Freyia, Njördr's – the god of winds and waves' – daughter, is so intimately connected to the valkyries – specialized norns (see ch. 3.4) – it is curious that at least one poet had the notion of Njördr's nine daughters, who in the *Solarljod* obviously represent norns.

The number nine in itself makes it necessary to consider whether the group of nine valkyries is connected to the nine primeval giantesses. This is interesting to our thesis which aims at showing how the Maiden hides behind both giant and divine beings. We may look back at the Maiden Gerdr in ch. 4.10 and consider how her father Gymir has been identified with Aegir. As Mundal, Ström and Näsström have argued (ch. 3.4), the collective of *dísir* (a term covering goddesses, norns, valkyries, *fylgjur*, even giantesses) and the one great *Dís* are identical. The number nine used to describe the collective of valkyries – or giantesses – refers to something crucial in the mythology of the Maiden.

Within the context of Maiden-mythology, the number is repeated in Ódinn's nine-day trial on the World Tree, in Freyr's nine long nights of waiting, in Svípdag's nine *galdr* and in Menglöd's nine maidens. The valkyries, as we have seen, always appear nine in number, or, alternatively, three by nine. The importance of the number nine is repeated in Snorri's version of the Gunnlöd story, where Ódinn does the work of nine thralls on the fields of the giant *Baugi* ("The Ring"). Three draughts were necessary for Ódinn to fill

himself up with mead from all the three cauldrons, after spending three nights with Gunnlöd. The number three repeated three times is the number nine. According to Ström, the number nine symbolizes the stage between life and death.²⁶⁵ The number three also appears in the amount of time Óttarr has to learn his lessons in the Underworld and in the number of nights Sigurdr spends with Brynhildr. The number three is also associated with female beings; the three thurse maidens who instigated the creation of humankind, and the three norns who carved the runes of fate in the beginning of time. It is impossible to decide exactly what the number nine means in Norse cosmology, but our study of Maiden-mythology may give us a clue as to what it means within the context of initiation.

We are starting to see that a theme of “immortality” in one form or another appears to be present in the Maiden stories. To look for an explanation about the nine days – nine maidens theme, we should glance back at the idea of the nine primeval giantesses as worlds. The Norse cosmos know of many worlds – realms (*heimar*). The *Grímnismál* accounts for about twelve worlds. Some of these worlds are higher even than those of the gods; they belong to the light-elves. Some of these worlds, we may assume, are not subject to the force of death: for Hel rules only in nine worlds. As the story of Hermodr shows, the road to Hel takes nine days. It is no coincidence that Freyia rules in the ninth world. That is perhaps the uppermost – or shall we say the innermost - realm where death is a rule. We have several times touched upon the idea of a realm of immortality located in the heart of darkest Hel, a theme perhaps repeated in the place *Hlésey*, a place of no “winds” right in the middle of the giants’ ocean. There, Freyia, the Great Maiden, receives the dead, but within Maiden-mythology at least, she does not receive any dead. She receives the chosen, the worthy, and their afterlife is different from that of Hel-dwellers.

²⁶⁵ Ström, 1954, p.84. Ström uses the poem *Solarljod* as an example, where a person sits nine days on the *norna stóli* –the chair of the norns- before he is taken to the realm of the dead by a horse. Ström compares this with Hermodr traveling nine nights before he reaches the gates of Hel.

7: Masters of Initiation

Margaret Clunies Ross has argued that “myth is rarely, if ever, merely an explanation of religious usage. It has independent life even when closely associated with ritual and needs to be considered a cognitive system in its own right that has its own communicative and affective dimensions.”²⁶⁶ Approaching the theme of myths’ relation to ritual, Clunies criticizes the functionalist’s “concentration upon the social relevance of myth to the relative neglect of intellectual and communicative aspects”.²⁶⁷ I agree that myth may be read on its own and understood on its own terms without necessarily tying it up to concrete ritual behavior. In ch. 8, I will further explore some of the numinous meanings of the Maiden myths outside of the context of ritual. However, as we saw in ch. 3.3, many scholars have been able to detect patterns or themes within Norse myths and sagas that would seem to reflect actual ritual. In chapter 4, 5 and 6, I have shown how I perceive a single, underlying structure of themes behind several different Divine and Heroic Poems. Conclusively, I will argue that the structure follows a pattern comparable to that of a typical initiation as described in the “Encyclopedia of Religions” (ch. 3.1). In the context of initiation, Eliade here speaks of “masters of initiation”, elders or religious professionals of different types who will guide and teach the neophyte. In this chapter, we will explore the teacher and helper figures that appear in the Maiden myths, asking ourselves whether these characters have counterparts in the “real” world of Norse religious practice. If they do, their role as teachers and guides in the poems could very well reflect the role of religious practitioners during rituals or experiences of initiation.

7.1: The *Völur*

In the poems *Hyndluljóð* and *Gróagaldur*, we meet three supernatural female beings. Hyndla is a giantess residing within the rock-layers of Hel, Gróa is the ghost of a woman who knows charms (*galdr*), and Freyia, we know, is a goddess often associated with love and fertility, but also with magic and death. However, all three of them have strong associations to the *völur*, sg.f. *völva* – women who are known to have roamed the Norse

²⁶⁶ Clunies Ross, 1994, p. 14

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 15

societies functioning as sibyls and practitioners of *seidr* and *galdr*, among other things. Not much is known about the real *völur*, but the association to *seidr* and divination is very clear from sagas such as *Eiriks Saga Rauda* and *Örvar-Odds saga*. Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga* makes it clear that *völur* were associated with black magic as well. A *völva* could be capable of moving beyond her body and acting in geographically distant places. One *völva* was also known to be able to fill the bay with fish in times of dire need. The *völur* would carry staffs, from which their title derives – *völ* means “staff”. Simek interprets the title as “wand-bearer”.²⁶⁸ A mythical *völva* is mentioned in the *Völuspá*, where she is associated with *seidr* and *gandr*, as well as with a sacrifice which we shall discuss in ch. 8.3 as a possible trial of initiation for the *völva*. The *völva*'s main art was *seidr*, an art which in *Örvar-Odds saga* included nightly preparatory rituals and, according to *Eiriks Saga Rauda*, included the calling of spirits by a magical song. The ritual described in the saga has been discussed as an example of shamanism, a theme we touched upon in ch. 3.1. In that section, we observed that Britt Solli, using Åke Hultkrantz's definition of shamanism, argued that the séance of *seidr* in *Eiriks Saga* could be interpreted as an example of Norse shamanism. Others, like Jan Peter Flood, have argued that the lack of a drum is an argument against shamanism in the *Eiriks Saga* ritual.²⁶⁹ To this argument, I would argue that Wilmos Dioszegi observed the existence of several so-called “staffed shamans” during his ethnographical study in Siberia. The use of a staff instead of a drum was very common among female shamans, who by the help of the staff alone could enter the desired trance – a feat observed and filmed by Dioszegi himself. Male shamans would often use a staff before they acquired the drum, but some would stick to the staff most of their lives.²⁷⁰ Flood's “drum argument” against shamanism in Norse society thus becomes irrelevant in the light of more information about “classical Siberian shamanism”. Whether the *völva* was a Norse version of a “staffed shaman” or not, she was certainly an important and respected personage in Norse society and is to be considered among the last of the Pagan practitioners in Scandinavia. These wise women were specialists in *seidr* and probably in *galdr* which, as Näsström

²⁶⁸ Simek, 1996, p. 367

²⁶⁹ Solli, 2002, p. 131, and Steinsland, 1997, p. 134, assume that the *völur* actually had drums. But in his dissertation, Flood, 1999, p. 130 argues that there is no evidence for this.

²⁷⁰ Dioszegi, 1968, p. 229-241, p. 255, p. 309

ans Solli have shown, are closely related to each other.²⁷¹ Now, Freyia the goddess was the first divine teacher of *seidr*, that art which, according to Snorri, contained the most power although it implied some “unmanly” behavior in the case of male practitioners.²⁷² This fact in itself could probably make of Freyia a *völva*, however divine. Gróa, on her side, performs *galdr*, an art also associated with *seidr* and the *völur*. Besides, a Gróa is encountered in the *Gylfaginningr*, where she is explicitly called a *völva* who heals by *galdr*. In the case of Hyndla, her speech of sacred ancestry takes upon itself escatological dimensions much in the manner of *Völuspá*, and is indeed called the “Short *Völuspá*” by Snorri. This title would certainly identify Hyndla as a *völva*.²⁷³ Now, the three ladies should be regarded as supernatural creatures in the poems; however, the role they play as teachers, advisers, and guides on the way through the Underworld would certainly befit that of a master of initiation. It is not completely impossible that real *völur* played such roles in rituals and trials of initiation. Certainly, the *Örvar-Odds saga* relates that the *völva* Heid had apprentices with her, both female and male.

7.2: Atli, Sinfiötli and Skírnir

Atli is the son of king Hiörvarðr’s earl. It is he who woos Sigrlinn for the king, spending a winter in the realm of Svafnir. It is he who listens to birds’ speech in the grove and carries the message of sacrifice to the king. Again, it is he who takes the king up to the mountaintop and to the river, from where Svávaland may be reached, and he who enters this realm of sleep or death while guarding the king by the riverside at night, bringing back the Maiden. All the actions of Atli contain the seeking of visions and the journey into the Other World, as well as the magical ability to understand birds’ speech. Tacitus explained that Germanic tribes read omens in birds and other phenomena, and that this was particularly related to sacred groves, an art undertaken by kings or priests.²⁷⁴ We may remember that it is only after Sigurðr has come quite far in his initiation that he may understand birds’ speech, a prelude to his learning about healing, magic and eloquence. It

²⁷¹Näsström, 2001, p. 57, Solli, 2002, p. 131

²⁷²*Ynglinga saga* 7, Gyldendal 1944, p. 6

²⁷³Steinsland, 1997, p. 135 speaks of a “volve-gyger” (*völva*-giantess) as an initiator.

²⁷⁴Mattingly, 1970, p. 109

is noteworthy that Atli is the son of the *earl*. English “earl” and Norse “jarl” is derived from the Old Nordic word *erilaR*, supposedly indicating “priest”, “rune-master”, “magician”, showing the original sacral function of what should later develop into the title “earl” (*jarl*).²⁷⁵ In st. 20 of the Poem of Helgi Hjörvardsson, Atli is mocked for having been castrated. This is a feature Atli shares with Sinfiotli, Helgi Hundingsbani’s elder brother.

Sinfiötli’s role in Helgi Hundingsbani’s poem is somewhat vague, but the importance of his character in the tradition is testified in the *Frá Dauda Sinfiötla* and in the *Volsunga Saga*. The latter saga reveals that Sinfiötli, after proving that he can bear excruciating pains, was sent by his mother to the forest to live with his father (and mother’s brother) Sigmundur Volsung and share his exile. Sinfiötli shows his ability to handle poisonous serpents without fear, and the father-uncle and son start living like wolves and actually changing into wolves’ shapes, howling like wolves and understanding the sounds. In the shape of wolves, they attack the men of an evil king whenever they can. In this state of being, they are able to understand the messages of weasels and ravens, and learn about healing arts from the animals. They also have to stay in an underground dwelling when the time comes to shed the wolf-skins, which they then burn. After being restored to society, Sinfiötli accompanies his father-uncle when he marries and begets Helgi Hundingsbani. Both the fact that Sinfiötli is the child of a brother and sister, and his experiences while in “exile” in the forest, make Sinfiötli a very marginal and special character. Although the son of a king and queen, he never appears to aspire to kingship himself. Sinfiötli comes to take the role as assistant to Helgi, accompanying his younger brother and prince on his warrior’s quest. He leads the initial argument of insults before the battle against Sigrún’s kinsmen, the giants. During this argument it is revealed that Sinfiötli too, is castrated. (See app. XI). When Sinfiotli dies, as related in *Frá Dauda Sinfiötla*, his father-uncle Sigmundur carries his oldest son’s corpse on his back until he reaches a river -the shores of Hel- where a ferryman takes possession of the body while Sigmundur returns to the living.

²⁷⁵ Näsström, 2001, p. 69

Atli, Sinfiötli and finally Skírnir, whom we encountered in ch. 4.8 - 4.13, all share a common trait: they all master the art of venturing into the Other World. There is one character in the history of religions whose main task, according to Eliade, is the travelling into the other worlds with his soul: the shaman. The shaman does so through so called “techniques of ecstasy”, means by which he enters a state of trance through which his soul may leave his body and fly into the other spheres of existence, such as the worlds of the dead and of the spirits. Atli and Skírnir both have the role of “wooing the Maiden” for their royal friends: Atli woos Sigrlinn for king Hjörvarðr, Skírnir woos Gerðr for Freyr the “King of Men”. They both return to their lords with the messages from the Other World. In Atli’s case, he finally succeeds in bringing back the Maiden for his king (and even a maiden for himself!). Sinfiötli does not woo the Maiden for Helgi Hundingsbani, but like Atli does for Helgi Hjörvardsson, he accompanies his lord-brother to the world of the Maiden’s kinsmen, the giants. That world could certainly also be said to be an “Other World” than the normal. The information about castration in the past, in Sinfiötli’s case undertaken by three *thursa-meyjar* – “thurse maidens” - is puzzling and can not be explained with any certainty. It does bring to mind, however, the idea of “unmanliness” associated with *seidr*. Indeed, the great god of *seidr*, Óðinn, calls himself *Ialk* – the “Gelding”, in *Grimnismál* st. 49, and is also called so in the *Gylfaginning*. *Seidr* has often been disputed as a kind of Norse shamanism, but it has not been proven that the practitioners of *seidr* were experts of soul-journeying, as Atli, Sinfiötli and Skírnir could appear to be. The “techniques of ecstasy” could easily be read into Atli’s vision quest in a grove, on a mountain top or by a river at night, into Sinfiötli’s shape changing, dwelling in the wilderness, learning healing from birds, and handling serpents. It could also be perceived in Sigmundr’s accompanying Sinfiötli to the shores of death, a very common task for a shaman.²⁷⁶ The activities of these three characters certainly are remindful of those of classical shamans, and, through the castration theme, we do see a possible link to their arts and the practice of *seidr*. Except for the *völva*, who cannot be proven to travel into the other worlds, it has been difficult for scholars to find any traces of “real shamans” in Norse society, a splendid argument against “shamanism” in Norse religion. I suggest, however, that the figures of Atli, Sinfiötli and Skírnir reflect both a practice

²⁷⁶ Eliade, 2004, p. 205-214: “The Shaman as Psychopomp”

which resembles shamanism, and a more general religious office, in service of royal patrons. In the three figures we may be seeing an echo of the much-disputed “Norse shaman”, or at least a priestly character strikingly similar to one.

7.3: The Maternal Uncle

The *Hávamál* reveals that Ódinn was taught nine powerful charms by the “son of Bolthorn, Besla’s father”. Besla, as we know from Snorri, was Ódinn’s giantess mother. That makes Bolthorn’s son a giant and Ódinn’s maternal uncle. He is obviously well-versed in spells and connected to the journey Ódinn undertakes while hanging on the world tree. Another maternal uncle met with in the “Maiden myths” is Grípir, who is “wiser than everyone else and prescient”, ruling over many lands. Sigurdr seeks his uncle for advice and divination. As with the *völur* and the three “Other World-experts” above, a link to *seidr* may once again be suggested, since divination appears to have been one of the major purposes of *seidr*. According to Näsström, *seidr* is the form of divination that we meet in old Scandinavian religion.²⁷⁷ The image of the maternal uncle may hold ancient symbolic implications. Tacitus declared that most Germanic peoples considered the maternal uncle as responsible for his sister’s children as the father – in some tribes the maternal uncle was even more important.²⁷⁸ Sigmundr also has a role as teacher for the young Sinfiotli in the *Volsunga Saga*. He is Sinfiotli’s father, but at the same time his maternal uncle. Sigmundr’s journey to the river of death, carrying Sinfiotli’s corpse, is certainly a very typical shamanistic feat.

²⁷⁷ Näsström, 2001, p. 57

²⁷⁸ Mattingly, 1970, p. 118

7.4: Reginn: Dwarf, Smith and *Thul*

“...we would expect also to find examples in the literature of dwarfs acting as initiation masters, and this is in fact the case. Perhaps the most famous example in Old Norse tradition is the dwarf Reginn, foster father, educator, and initiation master for Sigurdr (...) Reginn may be seen as Sigurdr’s main initiator, but, as Marold points out, there are several other figures, such as Gripir, Hnicarr or Fiölnir, and the old man with the beard in the *Volsunga saga*, who advise and guide the hero through his various trials.”²⁷⁹

In *Fafnismál* st. 34, Reginn is called *ínn hára thul* –the “hoary *thul*”. A *thul* is an ancient designation of a religious office, connected to the verb *thylja*, which means to “mumble, recite, chant”.²⁸⁰ The *thul* is also mentioned in the *Hávamál* st. 111, where is also mentioned a *thularstol* – the “chair of the *thul*”- placed by the well of Urdr, from where an I - person (the *thul*) declares that he will recite the sacred lessons that he has heard in the Hall of the High One by the norms’ well. The main lesson that the *thul* relates is the nine-night trial on the World Tree, described in I – form as if it were the *thul* himself who experienced them. The possibility of the *thul* being the actual initiator on the World Tree, and not Ódinn, has led some scholars to suggest that the *thul* was a kind of shaman.²⁸¹ If we dismiss this theory, the name and function of the *thul* would at least reflect a bard-like sacral office: a priestly character whose task is to recite in sacral connections. Indeed, Reginn does act like a bard both in the *Reginnsmál* st. 26 and in the *Fafnismál* st. 23, praising the warrior’s deeds of his prince.

In addition to his identity as *thul*, Reginn is said to be a dwarf in the prose introduction to *Reginnsmál*, and shown as a smith in the prose interpolation between the poem’s st.14 and 15. Lotte Motz has put forward the thesis that the dwarfs of Norse myths, as well as the smith-figures of Germanic legend, are the poetical memory of a very ancient type of priesthood connected to artisanry, craftsmanship, and grave-tombs. The dwarfs, who also are smiths, resemble such a priesthood through their functions in the stories, pictured as a race of (apparently mostly unmarried) men dwelling in rock and mounds, not seldom burial mounds, forging treasures for gods and men, thus being in the service of the divine and human ruling dynasties. In addition, they play the role of healers and teachers, well-versed in magic and mythical lore. They frequently change shape into animals, they are

²⁷⁹ Grimstad, 1983, p. 195

²⁸⁰ Näsström, 2001, p. 70. Haugen, 1983, p. 20

²⁸¹ Solli, 2002, p. 157

the temporary keepers of the mead of poetry, and through their names, we learn that they are closely associated with chanting and reciting. They appear as sages, possessing knowledge of the past and of the future. They fit right into the pattern of a pagan priest, being craftsmen at the same time. The combination is, according to Motz, not at all unknown in the history of religions. The fact that the Norse word for dwarf, *dvergr*, does not denote a short stature, but a physical damage, and that the German word for smith, *schmied*, does not denote a metalworker, but a “creator”, convinces Motz of her own thesis. The “damage” alluded to in the word *dvergr* could refer to a mutilation during initiation, a concept reflected in the myth of Ódinn tearing out his eye for the sake of a draught of the mead of wisdom.²⁸² Both Motz and Kaaren Grimstad consider Reginn a typical “master of initiation” in the story of Sigurdr.²⁸³ His role as Sigurdr’s teacher and guide in the poems in which, as we have shown, the structure of themes may indicate a tale of initiation, convinces me that this is the case.

7.5: Ódinn

In chapter 4.6, we concluded that Ódinn as god of creation played the role of divine archetype in the many stories of his initiation. Such a divine archetype is the role model, the example, for the humanbeings who wish to undertake similar trials in order to learn similar lessons. We have noted shamanistic traits in Ódinn and in his initiation, as well as in the “masters of initiation” described above. Diószegi emphasizes the role of the “shaman ancestor” in Buryat shamanism where the the shaman ancestor – the first of all shamans - is in fact the main master of initiation appearing in the neophyte’s dreams and visions.²⁸⁴ In the *Reginnsmál*, Ódinn miraculously appears in the middle of the stormy ocean, counseling Sigurdr on his way. Ódinn, the god who first undertook the trials of initiation in the beginning of time, thus plays the role of a master of initiation, quite in the manner in which a shaman ancestor would direct the shaman neophyte.

²⁸² Motz, 1983, Introduction, p.1-12, p.87-121

²⁸³ Grimstad, 1983, p. 187-205

²⁸⁴ Diószegi, 1968, p. 110-114

8: The Mead and the Maiden

8.1: The Maiden: Encompassing the Three Worlds

Giantess, goddess and valkyrie - as we have shown in the previous chapter, a “Maiden figure” offering mead to the hero after trials of initiation encompasses all three functions. The giants, the “devourers”, are usually understood as the enemies of the gods, representatives of the chaos before the gods ordered the world, and the ultimate destroyers of the gods. However, as Steinsland has shown, giants, particularly giantesses, were also objects of cult and sacrifice.²⁸⁵ The giantesses do play an ambiguous role in Norse mythology, being the mothers, wives, and lovers of the gods. In the *Gröttasongr* (see appendix XII), two giantesses called *Fenja* (“Heath Dweller”) and *Menja* (“Necklace-Bearer”)²⁸⁶ tell their own story. Growing up nine winters deep within the earth, the giantesses finally emerge, shaping the rocks and then throwing the “fast rotating rock boulder” into the hands of humankind. The giantesses proceed to moving among the armies of men, allotting victory to some and death to others. When they come into the possession of king Frodi, they start “grinding” peace and plenty, making possible the *Frodafridr* –the Peace of Wisdom (see ch. 6.1), until they realize that they are being abused. This realization, combined with the memory of their glorious past, incites the giantesses to grind once again invasion, war and unpeace, as a warning to Frodi to “wake up” and listen to their ancient tales.

Fenja and Menja would actually seem to play the roles of valkyries and of norns, from the way they allot victory and death, moving among the warriors, and from the way they “grind” the fate of the world. Their giantess-hood is explicitly stated in the beginning of the poem and identifiable in their having formerly dwelled far beneath the ground. Gunnlöd and Gerdr also dwelled far beneath the rock layers, but Gerdr is invited out of that realm and into the divine one through marriage. As we have seen, Gunnlöd and

²⁸⁵ Steinsland, 1986, p. 212-220

²⁸⁶ Simek, 1996, p. 79-80, 211

Gerdr could appear to be identical since both stand out as the same Maiden character. According to the *Grottasöngur*, as soon as the giantesses “emerge”, they become like mistresses of fate.

What, then, is the usual relationship between valkyries and giants? In ch. 6.4, we saw that the valkyries were situated in a realm of the dead before they were discovered and taken out of there by heroes such as Atli and Sigurdr. The realm is recognizable both through its names, its rulers and the symbols of “giant in eagle’s disguise” and great serpent. Among other known valkyries, there is Hljod in the *Volsunga saga*, the daughter of the giant *Hrímnr* – the “Frosty One”.²⁸⁷ In ch. 6.9, we saw that there was a certain resemblance between the collectives of valkyries and giantesses as related to giant fathers. It could certainly appear as if the valkyries were daughters of giants. The valkyries also have giant “suitors”.

The valkyries are often identified as a specialized type of norns. The norns, as the valyries, have a “questionable” past. In the *Voluspá* st. 8, three *tussameyjar* – thurse maidens (giantesses) - powerful and much knowing, emerge while the (male) gods are having fun in their recently ordered cosmos. The arrival of the three female representatives of the older, giant world mysteriously causes the gods to create the dwarfs and the humans. As soon as the humans are created and the World Tree is presented in the poem, the theme of three maidens is repeated, only this time, the maidens are identified as norns, Urdr, Verdandi and Skuld, allotting the fate of men, carving runes into the wood. We do not, of course, know for certain that the three giantesses of st. 8 are identical with the three norns of st. 20. In my opinion, such identification appears logical. Both events instigate major changes in the universe having to do with destiny. In the *Vaftrhudnismál* st. 49, we hear of “Mogthrasir’s Maidens”, owning three rivers that flow through the world. They are *hamingjor* and travel through the world, “even through they were born among giants”. A *hamingja* is considered the personified fate of a person. The word comes from *ham-gengja*, which originally referred to people who could make their *hamr* – their soul independent of their body – walk, yet this understanding appears to

²⁸⁷ Simek, 1996, p. 158: “The one covered with hoar-frost”. *Volsunga saga* 1, Byock, 1999, p.36

have vanished, and *hamingja* was understood as “fortune giver” in the late Viking age, thus closely associated with fate.²⁸⁸ Thus, the *hamingja* could be compared with the *fylgja*, which has also been identified as the soul when it is separate from the body.²⁸⁹ The *fylgja* was also considered a kind of guardian spirit, often seen in dreams or by people with supernatural powers. It could appear either as an animal or as a woman.²⁹⁰ Else Mundal has shown that there is a fundamental difference between the animal *fylgjur* and the woman ones.²⁹¹

The idea of a woman guardian spirit (see ch. 3.1), is combined with the idea that the *fylgja* and the *hamingja* control the person’s fate. In the *Gylfaginning*, Snorri relates how everybody has a “norn” who is present at the individual’s birth and who decides his or her fortune through life. These norns (of the individuals) “come from” the well of Urdr, the oldest norn. Snorri apparently understood these “norns” of the individuals as aspects of the original cosmic norns. In my opinion, the norn of the individual that Snorri mentions, the *hamingja* and the *fylgja* are overlapping concepts. Turville-Petre counts the valkyries among the other *dísir* such as *hamingjor* and *fylgjur* as guardian spirits.²⁹² The valkyrie, a kind of norn, certainly fits into the picture of “guardian spirit”, since she follows and protects her hero and in many ways directs his life, as we saw in the case of the two Helgis, where the valkyries appear to remind the hero of his duties and guide his way. Turville-Petre and Ström (see ch. 3.1) have made connections between the *fylgjur* – *dísir* and the soul-concept. This is a very disputable theme,²⁹³ but that the valkyrie – *dísir* could be associated with the soul in some way or other does seem to be apparent in the theme of reincarnation where, as Kragerud showed, a big point is made of how the hero and the valkyrie belong together even after death and into the next life. A similar theme was touched upon in the story of Menglöd. The idea of the valkyrie-Maiden as – perhaps - the hero’s own soul would certainly give us a new understanding of Maiden mythology.

²⁸⁸ Simek, 1996, p. 129

²⁸⁹ Simek, 1996, p. 96

²⁹⁰ Ström, 1985, p. 205-206

²⁹¹ Mundal, 1974

²⁹² Turville-Petre, 1975, p. 221-235. Ellis-Davidson, 1998, p. 177 believes the concept of valkyries as guardian spirits belongs to an older tradition.

²⁹³ Else Mundal, 1974, criticizes such notions in her work on the *fylgjur* of Norse literature because they seem very difficult to prove on the basis of the sources themselves.

If that was the case, it could seem as if the point of all the trials is that the hero has to wake up the sleeping valkyrie of his soul.

Apart from this last possibility, we are aware that there could be a very strong connection between the valkyrie-norn, the *fylgjur* and the *hamingjor*. They are all associated with fate, and they could fit neatly into the picture of individuals' norns mentioned by Snorri. Thus, the *hamingjor* who are associated with the three great rivers and who "travel through the worlds", could be norns and/or valkyries. In *Vaftrhudenismál* st. 48, the question about Mogthrasir's maidens is "who are the maidens who journey in troops, wise in spirit, over the sea?" (*Hveriar ro their meyar er lith a mar yfir - frodgediath ar fara?*). The valkyries of the Heroic Poems are also described as a collective of maidens "riding air and sea". Indeed, the norns and the valkyries are often depicted in this dynamic manner. In the *Voluspá* st. 33, the valkyries are seen, as they emerge for the first time in history, as "ready to ride the world". In the first poem of Helgi Hundingsbani, norns arrive at Helgi's birth and perform a dance-like, dynamic action of throwing and fastening the threads of fate. The *Hárbardsljod* st. 18, tells of maidens who dig the ground out of the valleys, spinning threads of the sand. (Among them is one, the "linen white", whom Ódinn greatly desired). All in all, I believe that Mogthrasir's maidens could be identified as norns or valkyries, and, importantly, "they were born among giants."

As the Maiden figure hides behind stories of giantesses wooed by the gods in the beginning of time, and behind stories of the later valkyries wooed by men who were blessed by the gods, we could detect the myth of a once-giantess who became a goddess, a goddess capable of appearing in many shapes at one and the same time, spinning the fates of the individuals. We should not forget that the valkyries – as well as *fylgjur* and *hamingjor* - are often called *dísir*, a name used also of goddesses such as Freyia (*vanadís*). As remarked in ch. 3.4, the name *dís* is derived from old Indian *Dhisana*, a goddess who was one goddess and many goddesses at the same time. When appearing as many, their name was the *dhisanas*. As Ström and Näsström have argued, the same type of concept is shown in the Norse tradition through the existence of a *Disarsalinn*, a

building used during the great ritual gathering in honor of the *dísir*, where the king had to be present. Although the *dísir* were a collective of female deities, the hall was dedicated to the one *Dís*, probably the “Great Goddess”.

The implication of a Great Goddess, here called “the Maiden” who is a giantess in origin, opens up for many more discussions. I will here mention only two, both of which have been touched upon throughout this study. One: the theory of the three wells that are really one. Two: the ogress-goddess opposition. The latter leads me to a conclusion that has to do with the well-known “promiscuity” of the Great Goddess Freyia.

8.2: The Two-Faced Goddess

8. *Mögr fann ammo mioc leitha ser,
hafdi hafda hundrud nío;
enn annor gecc algullin fram
brúnhvit bera biorveig syni*

The son found Grandmother horrible to look at
Nine hundred heads the old one had
But another came forth, all golden
Bright-browed, she brought strong drink to her son

Hymiskvida st. 8

In ch. 6.7, I argued that the poems *Hávamál*, *Fjölsvinnsmál* and *Sigrdrifumál* suggest that the three wells of norns (gods), Mimir (giants) and Hel (Death) are the same, or aspects of each other. The hero learns at all the three wells simultaneously. The Maiden holds residence in Hel and is a teacher of runes (the norns), and the descent to her world is associated with Mimir’s tree and well of memory. A giant always guards the Maiden, whether he be her father or her warden. One of these giants, Suttungr, was compared to Mimir in ch. 4. The Maiden encompasses the three worlds where the hero receives sacred knowledge and sacred marriage.

Since the Maiden appears to reside in Hel, or rather in a special, bright place deep in the heart of dark Hel, it is reasonable to question what kind of relation she has to the lady of the dead. Since she is a giantess of origin, it is not unlikely that she, in one aspect, is Hel. We have shown how the Maiden is shown in opposition to an ogress of death, representing an alternative. The *Skírnismál* poem could give us a clue as to what exactly

is the relation between the Maiden and the ogress; there, Gerdr is shown two alternative modes of existence, one as an ogress gaping behind the gates of death, deprived of the company of all but hideous ogres, another as a divine bride in possession of the most precious treasures of the gods. It is clear that the ogress and the divine bride are one and the same Gerdr. Of course, we know that Gerdr married Freyr and became equal with the goddesses, but it is useless, in my opinion, to read myth as if it were linear history. Gerdr is much more than a girl pressed into marriage with a god under threat of becoming an ogress. Gerdr is one of the names behind which the Maiden hides, and her marriage to Freyr should be read symbolically. In other settings, the Maiden is married to Ódinn, to Óttarr, to Svípdag, to Helgi, to Sigurdr, to Gunnarr - and in each case, she is shown in opposition to the ogress of death, her alternative mode of being. As Hilda Ellis-Davidson has pointed out, it is not unusual for the Great Goddess to appear both as an old hag and a beautiful maiden.²⁹⁴ Svava Jacobsdottir shows how, in the Irish sources that are equivalent to the Norse Maiden myths, the Maiden herself often appears as an old hag until the hero agrees to marry her. Through an analysis of both Irish and Indian sources, Jacobsdottir concludes that more than kingship inauguration was involved, the idea of an immortal existence must also have been present in the myth of the mead-offering lady.²⁹⁵ The image of Hel that Snorri provides us with in the *Gylfaginning* is extremely valuable, for he tells us that the face of the mistress of the dead is blue as death on one side, pink as life on the other.²⁹⁶ The symbolism should be obvious; Hel is both life and death. The simplest explanation of the hero's trials in the Maiden's realm could be this: When visiting the Underworld with all its monsters and trials, the hero must "marry" the rosy-cheeked face of Hel, the Maiden, in order to return to the world alive. The experience or ritual of marriage with the Maiden could carry in itself more implications still, such as the possibility of a hope of an alternative after-life in Ódinn's *Valhöll*, where warriors are continually revived so they may serve the gods or in Freyia's friendly and serene *Folkvangr* rather than extinguishment in the dark, serpent-infested Misty Hel. Obviously, as we have shown in the previous chapters, the marriage also included esoteric teachings that would enable the hero to function as a healer, poet, sorcerer, a religious professional

²⁹⁴ Ellis-Davidson, 1998, p. 22

²⁹⁵ Jacobsdottir, 2002, p. 51

²⁹⁶ *Gylfaginning*, Faulkes, 1987, p. 27

and even as a king. In the *Hyndluljóð*, we see that a wolf-riding giantess, whom Freyia addresses as “sister” and “girlfriend” in the beginning of the poem, is the conveyer of secrets. In other cases, such as in the *Sigrdrífumál*, the bright valkyrie is the teacher. There is certainly no strict border between the ogress and the Maiden – the two faces of the goddess.

8.3: The Great Lover

...asa oc alfa, er her inni ero
hverr hefir thinn hór verith!²⁹⁷

..of every god and elf in here
each has been your lover!

Gro Steinsland has argued that the idea of death held great variety in the Norse sources.²⁹⁸ One idea often ignored by scholars, who, like Snorri, prefer to order the mythic cosmos into neat geographical lines and human-like family relations (“the land of the dead here, the land of giants there, this goddess the wife of that god, this of another”), is the experience of death as an “erotic journey of pleasure”.²⁹⁹ Through poetry, dying is imagined as a feast and a marriage or erotic union with the mistress of death. (In women’s case, it would appear to be conceived as a feast, like the girl who wanted to “sup with Freyia” in the *Egils saga*). Above, we suggested that Hel and Freyia, or the ogress and the Maiden, are two faces of the same entity. Freyia, of course, is known as a receiver of the dead in her own right – her link to Hel is shown through the “Maiden-mythology” that we have been analyzing in this study. Now, Freyia is often presented as “goddess of love”. This title, it seems, stems from the fact that Freyia is perceived as “promiscuous”. In the *Lokasenna*, she is accused of sleeping with every elf and god in the hall of Aegir the sea-giant, and even with her own brother Freyr. In the *Gylfaginning*, Snorri can tell us that she liked romantic poems and that she was accessible to people concerned with love. Another source, the *Flateyjarbók*, relates how Freyia, there the wife of Óðinn, slept with four dwarfs in order to have the beautiful necklace *Brisingamén*. This information, apparently, has been enough to classify Freyia along with Aphrodite and Venus as goddess of sex and love. However, the accusations of promiscuity are

²⁹⁷ *Lokasenna* st. 30

²⁹⁸ Steinsland, 1992, p. 319-332

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 319

something Freyia shares with all the other goddesses in the Norse pantheon, and her roles as receiver of the dead, of being a *völva* or a sacrificial priestess are rather more particular and prominent in her character. Medieval Christian interpretators may have focused on the immoral behavior of the pagan goddess, and failed to realize the meaning and the depth of her loving embrace. If we look back to the *Lokasenna*, we must remember that the gods are feasting in Aegir's hall. That hall is a realm of death. Aegir is the giant of the sea. Freyia is also associated with the sea through her name *Mardöll* – “Illuminating Ocean”.³⁰⁰ Aegir's wife is Rán, who catches the drowned ones in her net. Dying at sea was associated with a feast in Rán's and Aegir's hall, and by “climbing Rán's bed”. When Freyia, receiver of the dead, has been the lover of every elf and Áss in that hall, it is a piece of information that reaches beyond Loki's superficial accusal of promiscuity. Her embrace is death. In her role as “Maiden”, she embodies the alternative to the net of Rán and the serpents of Hel. Her love provides her “lover” with a new beginning. And as Näsström has argued, her person embodies all the goddesses, - in that case, she cannot be other than the lover of all the gods.



Golden Plate, Roman Iron Age, Uppland, Sweden

³⁰⁰ Simek, 1996, p. 202 : “the one who illuminate the sea”, or “who makes the sea swell”

8.4: The Precious Mead

The “drink of precious mead” (*drykk hins dyra miadar*), “the ale of memory” (*minnis aul*), the “Poetry Stir” (*Odrerir*), thus is the drink called that the Maiden offers to the hero. It seems possible to decode where the drink comes from, mythically. First and foremost, the Maiden is associated with the three wells below the World Tree, as suggested in ch. 8.1. Now we know that Ódinn obtained a drink from the well of the giant Mimir, the drink of memory and wisdom, by sacrificing one of his eyes. By hanging nine days on the World Tree, he achieved the runes, which were carved by the norms who dwell at Urdr’s well, and he received the precious drink of Poetry Stir. All evidence suggest that he received it from Gunnlöd in the realm of the dead. The drink appears to be somehow connected with the three wells and the three worlds beneath the World Tree. We do not know how, but *Gylfaginning* and the *Grímnismál* give a clue. In the *Grímnismál* st. 36, the valkyries are named who give ale to the *einherjar* – the One-Harriers. In st. 25, we learn that the “fair mead” that never diminishes is milked (presumably by the valkyries) from a goat called Heidrún. As Else Mundal has pointed out, this goat has a central function in the continuation of life in *Valhöll* and is thus very important for the safety of the divine cosmos, whose defenders the One-Harriers are supposed to be.³⁰¹ Standing on the roof of *Valhöll*, Heidrún (whom we earlier identified with Freyia) eats from the tree *Læradr* while filling a whole vat of mead every day, enough to keep the One-Harriers eternally revived and feasting. Next to the goat stands a stag who also feeds on the tree, and from its horns drops fall down into *Hvergelmir*, Hel’s serpent-infested well. Since *Hvergelmir* is situated at the foot of the World Tree, it becomes obvious that the tree *Læradr* is the World Tree itself, from which the goat Heidrún eats. The mead of Heidrún is directly linked to the well of Hel through the st. 25 and 26; obviously, the eating produces the precious liquids from the goat’s udders and the strange drops from the stag’s horns. The goat’s mead goes to the eternally living One-Harriers, the stag’s liquid falls into Hel. Both liquids are taken from the World Tree. Now, from where is the World Tree nourished? Snorri tells us that it is nourished by the norm Urdr, who waters the tree every morning with water from her sacred well at the heart of the divine world. That well from which the tree is watered, has the effect of

³⁰¹ Mundal, 1992, p. 241

revival and renewal, even transformation; anyone who bathes in it comes out shining and transparently white. The water keeps the tree from decay. Ultimately, the mead of the One-Harriers, served by the valkyries, is taken from that well of renewal. Something, obviously, is given back to the well of Death by the stag standing next to the goat, a symbolism too intricate to be discussed here. Turning our focus back to the goat, we are reminded that her name means Bright Hidden Knowledge, and that she is compared to Freyia in the *Hyndluljod*. The comparison makes sense since we have established Freyia as the Great Valkyrie, the one to whom the valkyries take the One-Harriers before the goddess allots seats in her own hall and in Ódinn's.

From this information, we learn that the mead is connected to the three wells and that it is somehow drawn from them through the leaves of the World Tree by an entity who has the shape of a goat but who could equally well be the Great Goddess. The mead has a transformative effect and keeps the drinkers eternally alive. It is associated with “hidden knowledge”. It is associated with memory and knowledge. Through the Maiden-mythology, we learn that it is strongly associated with memory of what is taught in the Other Worlds, that it conveys secrets of the cosmos, the knowledge of runes, fate, healing and poetry. As Sigrdrífa said, it is filled with good charms and runes of pleasure, manliness and power. It is offered by a goddess to a man who is her lover. The goddess may also be an aspect of his soul or his individual fate.

Much more is not revealed in the poems themselves. From ch. 3.2, we recall that Sváva Jacobsdottir compared Snorri's version of the myth of Gunnlöd with an Old Indian myth of *Soma*, sacred drink of the Vedic religion. *Soma* was also known as *madhu* (“honey”) which is etymologically connected to the Norse *mjöd* – mead. In some myths, soma was in possession of the *dhisanas*, which would certainly link Indian myth to Norse myth, where the mead is in possession of the *dísir*. A whole book (the ninth) is dedicated to soma in the *Rigveda*, and the hymns are many thousands of years old.³⁰² According to Brockington, a belief in an intoxicating beverage of the gods, a kind of honey or mead, probably goes back to the Indo-European period. Brockington also draws a parallel

³⁰² Brockington, 1996, p. 7

between the Indian legends of the eagle and *Soma*, the nectar-bringing eagle of Zeus, and Ódinn in eagle's shape fetching mead. The preparation and the offering of soma was a feature of Indo-Iranian worship, known in Iran as *haoma*. As a deity, Soma is a sage, a poet, a seer, stimulating thoughts and inspiring hymns. As a drink, it invigorates the gods, and is conceived as conferring immortality on gods and men and is called *amrta*, the "draught of immortality".³⁰³ The drink also produced ecstasy and was used by ascetics for inspiration. The ecstasy it caused could soar into the atmosphere, into the company of gods, enable one to see everything and go anywhere.³⁰⁴ In a list of universal polarities, Soma is placed against Agni alongside with "moon", "death" and the "female" as opposed to "sun", "life" and the "male".³⁰⁵ Within the schools of Kundalini Yoga, *Soma* is placed in the topmost *cakra*, being the quintessence of the body, its "nectar of immortality".³⁰⁶

As Michael Enright has argued, ritual drinking has its origins in an Indo-European past. The *soma* and the *haoma* and the "nectar" of Greek myth are met with again in the myth and culture of the Celts and of the Germans. According to Enright, the particulars of Germanic ritual drinking originated in the Celtic ones. We recall that Jacobsdottir compared Norse myth to Irish ones. Enright shows how the Celtic and Germanic traditions were connected during the Celtic Iron Age. The Celtic and Germanic sources show that ritual drinking was strongly associated with a woman and/or with a goddess, as was the case in many Old Indian myths.

³⁰³ Ibid, p. 16-17

³⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 75

³⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 129

³⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 156

8.5: The Maiden Unearthed: Archaeological Evidence

Michael Enright looks to European archaeology when trying to trace the history of the Germanic “liquor ritual” with its “lady with a mead cup” at its center. Going back as far as the fifth century B.C, Enright traces burials of great, high ranking Germanic ladies buried with wine-strainer, spoon-sieves and ladles in hand. Close to these obvious liquor-serving devices are cauldrons, cups and drinking horns. Sometimes the cauldron contains remnants of a drink, either made of barley or honey and always with a wide variety of herbs and fruits. These ladies were buried in such a way “as to suggest both her respected functions as distributor of drink as well as her high social status”. Males are also buried with drinking devices, but only the women are left with spoon-sieves and devices for servicing the drink – in their hands. The devices are left in their hands and in their belt alongside the keys that conveys their status as lady of the household. It becomes obvious from the rich burials that the status of great ladies was symbolized by their serving of drink. The evidences of “lady with a mead cup” and “liquor ritual” are trans-regional and pan-Germanic, reaching from southern Europe to Scandinavia and lasting for at least a millennium. The control and distribution of alcoholic drink was closely linked with high-born women. Enright sees a link between the lady, the drink and “fictive kinship”. This because the ladies are very often accompanied by a kind of drinking vessel called either *Ringgefässe* or *Drillingsgefässe*. The vessels are too elaborate to have ever been suitable for ordinary usage. From inscriptions, it is clear that these were ritual vessels used for the “creation of fictive brotherhood and sisterhood”.³⁰⁷ The *Ringgefässe* design found in Germanic graves has its origin in the eastern Mediterranean, “where they have been connected with fertility cults and the idea of a mystic marriage with a goddess.”³⁰⁸ The *Drillingsgefässe* are found among many cultures throughout the world and were already being crafted in the late Neolithic. The vessels were used for liquor that would run simultaneously through three different cups, and are connected to the Celto-Germanic triple mother goddesses through finds in shrines and temples dedicated to these “Mothers”. The *Ringgefässe* consist of three cups/vessels standing on one ring. All the cups are connected to each other so that the same liquor runs through the three vessels at

³⁰⁷ Enright, p. 107

³⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 107

the same time. It is of course a bit speculative, but I am certainly reminded of Gunnlöd's keeping three vessels containing the same mead – that Ódinn drank from after swearing a ring-oath. The link between the vessels to women and a “mothers’ cult” continues into the migration period. Enright argues that the finds confirm later texts indicating that women among the Germans were regarded as “having a special responsibility for the public ritual creation of brotherhood.”³⁰⁹ Scholars agree that the vessels possess a pronounced religious or magical significance. Enright draws a line from the women and the vessels to a goddess cult, more specifically a cult of a prophetic goddess which emphasizes reverence for a staff-bearing prophetic goddess.³¹⁰ I have underlined the last words because they are extremely interesting in the light of the next chapter. Enright speaks of a “prophetic womens’ cult” which possessed the same attributes in all regions of Germania. The contours and subtleties of the cult are unclear, but the archaeological finds reveal that the connection with women and various peculiar looking staffs and containers have long traditions in southern Germany going back at least to the fifth century B.C. and perhaps into European pre-history. The “cult staffs” accompany the ladies of the mead and the ritual vessels, as well as spinning and weaving equipment which, as Enright shows, links the woman to fate and divining. The staff, as well as the spoon-sieve and the vessel, “must (...) have had a symbolic association with leading women”.³¹¹ The staffs are always found in womens’ or girls’ graves, together with other objects which could easily be interpreted as magical. The links between women, staffs and cultic drinking vessels are manifold and ancient. Enright argues that the association with prophecy and the magical arts and high ranking women was constant for more than a millennium in the Germanic world. “Neither the antiquity, continuity, intensity nor popularity of the woman/liquor/prophecy complex can now be seriously doubted”.³¹² In Germanic society, the concept of aristocratic femininity was strongly correlated to the distribution of liquor. The association of women and liquor and ritual drinking has its natural explanation in the fact that brewing ale and preparing mead were the peculiar tasks of women. But the archaeological evidence also demonstrates that prophecy was a

³⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 108

³¹⁰ Ibid, p. 113

³¹¹ Ibid, p. 114

³¹² Ibid, p. 125

crucial part of the mead-cup motif. The links to staffs and magical objects should also lead us to ask whether the distributor of liquor was also a prophetess. Enright argues that archaeological evidence demonstrates the answer as positive.

Enright's approach is historical and sociological, trying to explain the archaeological evidence of the existence of "professional", high-ranking ladies who serve mead and carry staff and spindle whorls by their function in society. Primarily, Enright argues that the lady had an important role within the warband where she established brotherhood and hierarchy through ritual offering of drink. The lady who stands out as a queen in late Migration period (such as the time of the *Beowulf* poem), has her equivalent in "prophetesses" who operated alongside kings in early Germanic society, who originated as "tribal matrons". For the present thesis, Enright's summary of archaeological finds is valuable because it shows the antiquity and popularity of the idea of a magical female and the ritual serving of mead. Enright sticks to his sociological explanation, of which he has proof, yet he admits that there are subtleties within the religion of the staff-bearing womens' cult (and thus, the mead-serving womens') which are difficult to interpret. Enright emphasizes the continuity, the antiquity of this wide-spread cult. My own interpretations and conclusions about "Maiden-mythology" lead me to assume that the imagery of the Maiden with the mead in the myths somehow reflects at least some part of this cult. Since I have interpreted Maiden-mythology as centered around initiation rites, I cannot agree with Enright that the only main purpose of the Lady with mead was to establish brotherhood and hierarchy in the warband. It certainly was one of the purposes, while the teaching and initiation into sacred knowledge must have been another. The existence of ladies serving mead ritually in actual Germanic society would indicate that the Maiden of the myths had her human counterparts. The other objects, such as the cult staff, the spindle-whorl related to fate and divination, and the magical objects (probably kept in pouches) indicate that she was a religious professional. There is only one woman character in the Norse sources who is definitely connected to the carrying of staffs and the art of divination and sorcery, and that is the *völva*.

8.6: The Ultimate Master of Initiation

21. *That man hon fólkvíg fyrst í heimi,
er Gullveig geirum studdu
ok i höll Hárs hana brendu;
thrysva brendu thrysva borna,
opt, ósjaldan, tho hon enn lifir.*

She remembers the first war in the world
when Gullveig was hoist on the spears
and in the High One's hall they burned her
three times they burned the three times born
often, not seldom; yet she still lives!

22. *Heidi hana hétu, hvars til húsa kom,
völu velspá, vittu hon ganda
seid hon hvars hon kunni,
seid hon hugleikin,
æ var hon angan illrar brudar.³¹⁴*

She was called Heidr when she came to the settlements
the prophecy-wise *volva*, she knew how to make spells
She performed *seidr* wherever she could
With ecstatic (crazed) mind/soul, she performed *seidr*³¹³
She was always sought by wicked women.

In the *Völuspá* st. 21 and 22, the first war in the world, that between *Aesir* and *Vanir*, is associated with the arrival of a *völva* called Gullveig and then Heidr. She is burned three times in the hall of Ódinn, and survives every time. She proceeds to operate in society as a wandering figure performing *seidr* and teaching it to the women. Somehow, this is connected with the war which had as its the ultimate consequence that Njördr, Freyr and Freyia took up residence as gods among the *Aesir*. Freyia teaches *seidr* to Ódinn, the mead of poetry is created and lost, with the subsequent quest undertaken by Ódinn in order to retrieve the mead from Gunnlöd. Thus, our subject of the Maiden is intimately connected with the *Aesir-Vanir* war and its mysterious instigator, the *völva* Gullveig.

Many interpretations have been presented as to the nature of Gullveig-Heidr. Näsström declares that Freyia herself must be hiding behind the names, and that her function here is to infiltrate the stronghold of the *Aesir* with witchcraft, and even if they try to kill her, she returns, continuing her destructive plan, first and foremost through demoralizing the women. Already while operating within the *Aesir*'s fortress, the *Vanir* gods break down the fences of the gods, entering with their *galdr* - songs of victory. Gullveig, Näsström decides, must mean "Gold-thirst", which shows her greed for gold, while Heidr is simply a common name for a sorceress.³¹⁵

³¹³ In the Codex Regius the lines are *seid hon kuni/ seid hon leikinn* –which would, according to Strömback, 2000, mean "she knew *seid*, she performed *seid* ecstatically (crazed)". The Swedish term used by Strömback for my "ecstatically" is "*förryckthet*".

³¹⁴ *Voluspá*, st. 21-22

³¹⁵ Näsström, 1998, p. 68, p. 91, p. 128

Clunies-Ross also identifies Gullveig with Freyia through her role as *völva* (practitioner of *seidr*) and of sacrificial priestess (Gullveig, Clunies-Ross argues, is sacrificed) and the connection between her operations before the war and her arrival at the end of it. Gullveig and Freyia perform the same mythological functions. The reasons for the violent treatment of Gullveig have to do with what she represents in relation to the Aesir. The Norse cosmos is divided into polarities where male and female is one of them. The Aesir are fundamentally male, representing the ordered and reasoned world. Gullveig is female and a master of sorcery, which makes her appear threatening to the Aesir. According to Clunies-Ross, she offers herself and her arts to the Aesir, but they will have none of it. Their stabbing her with spears is a symbolical penetration leading to death rather than the kind of penetration leading to fertility desired by Gullveig and the Vanir. The treatment of Gullveig led to the war – apparently the Vanir were angry on behalf of their kinswoman.³¹⁶

According to Steinsland, Gullveig may represent the three stages of the cosmic process of time; that she is killed three times and born three times may mean that she is present in each of the stages: the three norns by the well beneath the tree, Urd, Verdandi and Skuld, testify with their names a model of time divided into three.³¹⁷

As I see it, the problem with such interpretations as those above is that they go very far beyond what is ever actually said in the text. Snorri does not mention the Gullveig story with a word, just as he omitted the sacrifice of Ódinn. The Gullveig myth may, as Clunies-Ross has suggested, like the sacrifice of Ódinn simply have been “too pagan” for him. Thus we really do not know why Gullveig was sacrificed, stabbed and burned. The terrible treatment of the mysterious woman has obviously made scholars puzzled and appalled, causing a need to explain why (“she was greedy, she was a witch, she threatened the male order, she demoralized the women”). Both Näsström and Clunies-Ross also seem to forget that in the *Völuspá*, it is Ódinn and not the Vanir who starts the war, which make the explanation about the Vanir getting angry about the treatment of

³¹⁶ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 204

³¹⁷ Steinsland, 1991, p. 290. *Urdr* is made of *verda-* to become, while *verdandi* means “becoming”, and *skuld* marks the future form of the word.

their kinswoman rather awkward. Steinsland's interpretation aims at a deeper understanding of the symbolism of the stanzas, but it does not explain how Gullveig suddenly appears under a new name and operating as a religious professional, a *völva*, just after her sacrifice.

Näsström sticks to the common notion that Gullveig means “greed for gold”, denoting the evil character of this woman, an idea which is also seen in Rudolf Simek's dictionary, where she is said to be “the personified greed for gold”. Turville-Petre was among the scholars who first presented this idea. Apparently, this is the common understanding among scholars today.³¹⁸ However, as Simek and Clunies-Ross recognize: the literal meaning of the name is simply “Golden Drink”, “Golden Intoxication”, or “Gold-Power.”³¹⁹ None of these interpretations actually denotes “greed” at all. Gold is not always associated with greed in Norse mythology; on the contrary, the *Skáldskaparmál* shows that gold is often associated with poetry and numinous wisdom. The three possible interpretations of her name that are literal translations, not conjectures, are rather in accordance with the image of the Maiden with the Mead, who is all golden, serving a mead of power. To assume that her name indicates greed for gold is actually an assumption that has no foundation except in the scholars' wish to explain why Gullveig “deserved” her bad treatment.

As we have argued, Gullveig's treatment did not lead to the Vanir, her people, declaring war, but to Ódinn throwing his spear against the enemy (the Vanir) after a counsel with the other gods about who should “have the sacrifice”. We do not know what sacrifice they are arguing about, but in my opinion, it is not unlikely that it is that of Gullveig. And this is where we should take a closer look at the sacrifice. It is not necessary to make conjectures about what reasons lay behind the stabbing and burning of Gullveig and who did it. The important information is right there in the poem itself. The important information is that Gullveig defied death. She was burned to ashes three times, and

³¹⁸ Simek, 1996, p. 122. Turville-Petre, 1975, p. 159. Various scholars such as Müllenhof, Krause, Nordal and Turville-Petre have explained the name as “the drunkenness of gold, hence the madness and corruption caused by this precious metal” (Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 204)

³¹⁹ Simek, 1996, p. 122, Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 204

reborn every time. Gullveig is presented as a woman who defies the lot of all mortal creatures: death. Hoist on a spear, burned three times, she comes out alive, reborn. In my opinion, the trials undergone by Gullveig reflect Ódinn's trials on the world tree. My idea seems strengthened by the fact that, after her trials of death, she is presented as a practitioner of *seidr* in the society, or more generally, as a religious functionary, something that would logically follow any such death-trial initiation. Her new name is Heidr, meaning "Bright One" or "Shining One".³²⁰ This is also in accordance to the Maiden's usual bright, beaming, golden characteristics.

Gullveig could be a goddess, and she might have become one after her trial. Gullveig as Heidr is said to be a *völva* - a type of office that certainly existed in the Norse society; thus, we could be seeing a person, a woman, who challenges the gods' monopoly on immortality as the first human being in the world to do so. The quest for immortality is certainly not unknown in the history of religions, and defying death is known in its most violent forms among the initiation trials of shamans and mystics all over the world. The gods, of course, are terrified; one of their creatures, a mortal, has conquered death itself. (Such divine terror of human potential is known from many myths across the world, such as in the *Genesis* and in the *Popol Vuh*).

That is one interpretation. Another would be to see Gullveig as an equally supernatural creature as the gods from the start. The gods and giants of Norse cosmology are, after all, not eternally immortal, although they stay young for aeons due to the apples of the goddess Idunn (– another face of the Maiden?) Gullveig shows an art that Ódinn coveted, the art of changing fate – of conquering death. The art is closely connected to *seidr*, which not only encompassed divination as a foretelling of the future, but also functioned as operative divination – where the future, fate itself, could be altered.³²¹ Fate, ultimately, is death for all mortals. *Seidr* in its most advanced aspect could have been a means to change that ultimate fate.

³²⁰ Simek, 1996, p. 135: *Heidr*, f. means "light", "beaming", or "fame". The masculine noun *heidr* means "heath", "honour". The "light"-meaning semantically fits Gullveig's name best, according to Simek.

³²¹ Näsström, 2001, p. 62, argues that *seidr* and divination could be active and "operative" – where the practitioner could realize his or her desires through divine help if she/he had sufficient magical power.

This would more easily explain Ódinn's subsequent action of throwing a spear against the Vanir, thus starting the war. Ódinn's throwing a spear at someone is an action that represents a "kind of magical power the god possessed that would dedicate those warriors to himself as future inhabitants of *Valhöll*." ³²² He wanted Gullveig and her associates to come to Ásgarðr. The war led to the trio of Njörðr, Freyr and Freyia entering the Aesirs' world, and Ódinn got what he wanted: Freyia's teachings of *seidr*. When Clunies-Ross argues that Gullveig was killed because the Aesir did not want the sorcery she represented, she must have ignored the fact that Ódinn himself caused the war that led to the possibility of his learning exactly what Gullveig represented, and that he eagerly enough learned it and taught it to the other gods, who must have been quite interested, too.

Thus, the "aggression" against Gullveig emerges in a different light. We do not have to look for "aggressors", nor for their reasons. The "they" who stab and burn her could be just like the "they" who did not give the stabbed and hanged Ódinn drink nor food – "they" could be those who assisted the initiate in her and his trials. That it happens in the halls of the High One indicates that Ódinn observes the trial – and desires the same abilities. Both Ódinn's and Gullveig's death-trials and sacrifices lead to their becoming operating professionals: Gullveig becomes a wandering *völva* performing *seidr* and teaching the women, Ódinn becomes a much-sought sage whose words and actions lead to more words and more actions, and who teaches the priests.

In her study on Sumerian mythology around the sacred marriage of the Great Goddess, Anita Hammer points out that, while the older Sumerian religion knows of a female "culture hero", namely Inanna, who undertakes a journey to the realm of the dead and other tasks that shape culture, later Greek and Teutonic mythologies only know of male "culture heroes".³²³ This is the common conception, and scholars have argued how the Norse ordered, human and divine world is conceived of as male in essence, whereas the

³²² Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 206

³²³ Hammer, 1999, p. 83

world of giants is female in its essence. This would explain why the “culture hero” is always a male - the representative of “this side” is usually male - while the representative of the “other side” is a female.³²⁴ However, it could appear as if Ódinn, Freyr and all the heroes had their predecessor when it comes to trials of initiation and the conquest of death. And she was not a male.

³²⁴ Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 128-129, Heide, 1997, p. 58-61

9: Summary and Conclusions

Throughout this study, I have argued the existence of a “Maiden mythology” hidden behind the texts of the Poetic Edda. “Maiden mythology” is revealed through a common structure of themes, a pattern that may be traced in widely different poems from the *Hávamál* to the Heroic Poems. The center of this mythology is the “Maiden”, a supernatural young woman who receives a god or hero in her hall and offers him a cup or a horn of “precious mead”, a “drink of memory”. The offering is accompanied by a marriage between the Maiden and the hero. Before being granted the drink and the embrace of the Maiden, however, the hero has to undergo some fierce trials beginning with vision quests, visions, and a descent into the realm of the dead.

In ch. 3.1, I explained the term “initiation”, basing myself on Eliade’s “Encyclopedia of Religion”. Whether the initiation be part of a “puberty rite” or an initiation into a secret society or a mystical vocation (such as shamanism), the initiation usually includes isolation from society, secret revelation, and a ritual death followed by resurrection or rebirth. As Schjødt has pointed out, it is important that the one undergoing these trials actually receives a new position in society or cult after that, in order to call it an “initiation”. In Maiden mythology, the hero descends into the underworld, receives secret revelations, and returns to the living. Several of the poems, such as the *Hávamál* and the *Hyndluljóð*, indicate that the hero experienced a very severe “ritual death” involving the sacrifice of himself. Many of the poems, particularly the *Hávamál* and the poems of Sigurd also indicate that the hero returned from the trials a sage, a poet, a healer, even a king. It appears that the Maiden-mythology reflects the typical basics of initiation rituals into a sacred office.

I have frequently touched upon the kind of initiation ritual that is revealed, without arriving at any certain conclusions. The indications in the myths are varied at best. My main aim, as stated in the Introduction, is not to decide what the hero is initiated into, but to prove that the pattern, the structure of themes, exists, and thus, a “Maiden mythology”

reflecting initiation. Our study has, however, made it possible to get a vague idea about the nature of the initiations.

Firstly, the initiation is centred around the Maiden figure, whom we have identified as the Great Goddess. The initiation culminates in marriage. Since the Maiden is a goddess, we are talking about a sacred marriage, a *Hieros Gamos* as defined in ch. 3.1. Sacred Marriage is closely connected to kingship inauguration in many ancient cultures, and was known in Scandinavia during the Bronze Age, probably an idea imported from the great civilisations of the south such as the Sumerian, where sacred marriage was the central ritual of the religion. In Scandinavia, sacred marriage appears to have had a new “boom” from around the fifth century A.D, when the Germanic tribes started to constitute little kingdoms. From comparative sources such as the Sumerian and the Irish, the sacred marriage of the king and the goddess had to do with the consecration of a king by the Great Goddess of the land: only through her authorisation may a king enter his sacred office.

From the studies of Steinsland, it seems clear that sacred marriage was closely connected to kingship and it would seem as if the king had to undergo trials of initiation before claiming the throne. However, I have frequently referred to the nature of the teachings in “Maiden mythology” and had to conclude that the myths of the Maiden seem to cover a lot more than kingship initiation. The art of healing, poetry, *galdr*, *seidr*, magic, sorcery and journeys into the Underworld were hardly the unique domain of the king in Norse nor in Germanic society. In ch. 7, I showed that so-called “masters of initiation” were present at the trials, and that they could be identified with actual religious professionals operating in Scandinavia and Germania in pre-Christian times. These masters could not have been ignorant about the trials and teachings of the neophyte; on the contrary, we would assume that they were experts. They would become experts only by going through the same kind of trials beforehand.

In some cases, these experts would appear to be working in the service of kings, such as Atli, Sinfiotli and Skírnir. The relationship between kingship and the Maiden is visible in

the Heroic Poems, where the heroes are royal princes. The focus in the Heroic Poetry is not so much on kingship, however, as on the continuity of the relationship between the hero and the valkyrie through lives and deaths. The theme could very well be about the journey of the soul through different lives, as Kragerud suggested, and, as I suggested, about the valkyrie perhaps being the actual divine, immortal soul of the hero. This does not outrule the importance of kingship and sacred marriage, but it could show that the union with the Maiden is a far broader and more universal theme than that of kingship.

Looking back to “masters of initiation” such as the Atli figure, we will recall that Atli not only brings a Maiden back to the king, but also a Maiden for himself. Atli is certainly not a king, but an earl’s son, “earl” being the echo of an ancient religious office. Thus, the marriage to a Maiden from the Other World is not restricted to kings. Atli’s expertise has to do with journeying in the Other World, journeys that begin with vision quests and visions of a thoroughly ecstatic character. We should not ignore the ecstatic nature of the heroes’ experiences. The vision quests and visions followed by journeys to a different realm, a realm of giants and of the forces of death, are vividly described and I, at least, do not get the impression that these are descriptions of organized, routinized ritual. I am convinced that, if these myths reflect actual practice, that practice must have been of a highly ecstatic character. The ecstasy is not induced only among royal candidates. It would rather appear to have been part of the religious practice of Old Norse cult, performed by professionals – the initiated.

I have pointed out the likeness to shamanism, yet it is impossible to decide whether we are dealing with shamanism in its strictest, classical sense or something that only resembles it in greater or lesser degree. Shamanism was certainly known and even used by the Norse population, who lived very close to the shamanistic Saami, whom they apparently approached for help in magical matters. In ch. 7.5, I pointed out the likeness of Ódinn’s role as divine archetype and the role of Siberian “ancestral shamans”. Ódinn is certainly the most shaman-like character in the Norse sources, if we should believe Snorri’s descriptions of the god in the *Ynglinga saga*. I have touched upon the subject of shamanism in the Norse sources quite often, because I believe it is too prominent to be

ignored, particularly in the context of Maiden-mythology. As far as I have been able to investigate, the classical shamans' relations to great female divinities is a subject rather more prominent than Eliade ever suspected, but this is a subject which reach beyond the scope of this thesis. In any case, shamanism in some way appears to have had some influence on Norse mythology, whether it be because there were shamans in Norse society, practitioners who resembled classical shamans to some degree, or perhaps the influences were only remnants of a distant past. In the Encyclopedia of Religions, Eliade gives the impression that many scholars believe shamanistic rituals and tribal initiations were the structural and mythical origins of different kind of ritual behavior such as the type detected in Antique mystery cults.

While shamanism certainly could involve marriage to supernatural beings, such a union is also known from mystery religions, as described in ch. 3.1. Such religions also involved a "journey" (how ritualized or how personally experienced we do not know) through the Underworld, leading to a mystic union with the primary deity, very often the Great Goddess. This kind of initiation also involved esoteric teachings, and one of its central ideas had to do with overcoming death: how to earn a blessed existence after death. The emphasis on the life-death opposition in the Maiden mythology (as seen in the ogress-Maiden polarity) could in fact resemble mystery religions. We know for a fact that Germanic religions were influenced by Celtic and (often through them) other Indo-European religions such as the Greek and the Mediterranean ones, so that a link to Antique mystery religion would not be an impossibility. Michael Enright has pointed out that the emerging Germanic warrior tribes were greatly influenced by Celtic culture and religion at the end of the Celtic Iron Age (which started from about 500 B.C.). Enright shows that the ideology of the lady with a mead cup and the German liquor ritual was borrowed from the Celtic upper classes when Germanic tribes evolved their own class hierarchy. The Celts again were certainly influenced by Mediterranean culture through mercenaries and merchants. This period is the same that saw a wide variety of mystery cults in the Mediterranean. In fact, the way the Maiden mythology is conveyed certainly indicates a degree of secrecy and "mystery": it has to be deciphered through intricate symbols and is never explained or presented in complete. All in all, Maiden mythology is

not restricted to covering consecration of kingship. It appears that the Maiden will teach anyone who seeks her through the realm of death and who has the power to withstand that realm.

As to the idea that Maiden mythology reflects cultic practice, we have the archaeological evidences pointed out by Enright, as referred to in ch. 8.5. The Maiden with the Mead had her living counterpart in the world of Germanic tribal society. She was a woman holding a spoon sieve or other equipment for the ladling and serving of mead, and she was buried with cauldrons which designs were often of great antiquity and elaboration, and of obvious cultic purpose. She was also buried with jewellery showing her high rank, equipment for spinning and weaving which was forever associated with divination and fate-magic in the Germanic world. Finally, she would often have a staff which was exclusively for women of her rank, identified as a “cult staff” by the archaeologists, as well as objects that she had carried in a pouch in her belt. She has been found in burial sites from before the birth of Christ up to the last pagan strongholds in Scandinavia. Her cult was old and of great continuity and popularity. Her grave always holds a special position in the burial site, showing her as a revered and important person: in one site she is at the center with all the other graves laid in a half-moon formation around her. The finds strongly suggest a religious function, and Enright identifies the women as the “prophetesses” who held such authority in early Germanic societies. He also sees the connection between them and a goddess cult. According to Enright, the queens offering mead in later medieval literature were their descendants.

Michael Enright has argued that the (non-religious) literary evidence shows that the living Mead-Lady’s main function was to establish brotherhood and social positions through a ritual in the king’s hall. This would appear to be true, and reminds me of the idea of Freyia “arranging seats in the hall”. The arrangement of seats was important in Norse and Germanic society, showing the exact social position of each individual. Freyia’s arrangement of seats takes place, however, in an afterlife-realm. Extending our idea of the living Mead-Lady to the supernatural Maiden figure, we see that the Maiden, first and foremost, initiates and consecrates. Perhaps, reflecting how the living Mead-

Lady established the social positions of men within a warband by the chieftain's table, the Maiden established the spiritual (and thus social, religious) position of the neophyte.

Regarding the possibility of an actual ritual setting behind the Maiden mythology, the womens' staffs could perhaps indicate the involvement of women much like those who would later be recognized in Norse written sources as the *völur*. Indeed, the number nine would further associate the *völur* with Maiden-mythology; The *völva* of *Eiriks saga* was the last in a company of nine sisters, and the *völva* of *Örvar Odds saga* had nine apprentices of either sex in her following. Gullveig died three times and was reborn three times; a three by three count resulting in the number nine. A ritual enactment of the myth could, at some point in history, easily have involved a *völva* both as master of initiation, as suggested in ch. 7.1, and as the representative of the goddess herself, ladling out the precious mead and offering her cup and her embrace to the consecrated.

Appendixes

Appendix I to chapter 4.2: *Hávamál* st. 104-110

104. *Enn aldna iotun ec sotta,
nu em ec aptr um kominn,
fát gat ec thegiandi thar;
margom orthom melta ec i minn frama
i Suttungs sölom.*

To the old giant I went
now I have come back again
Little I would have got there, without speaking
many words I used to my advantage
In the hall of Suttungr

105. *Gunnlad mer um gaf gullnom stóli á
drycc ins dyra miathar; ill ithgiold
let ec hana eptir hafa
sins ins heila hugar
sins ins svara seva*

Gunnlöd gave me, from her golden throne
the precious drink of mead; a poor payment
I let her have in return
for her whole soul³²⁵
for her burdened spirit

106. *Rata munn letomc rúms um fá
oc om griot gnaga; yfir oc undir
stodomc iotna vegir, sva hetta ec hafði til*

I made a way for myself with the auger's mouth
and gnawed through the mountain; above and underneath
were the paths of the giants; thus I risked my head

107. *Vel keyptz litar hefí ec vel notith
fáss er frothom vant; thviat Ódrerir
er nu upp kominn á alda vés iartha*

he well-bought thing I have well enjoyed
The wise lack for little; for Poetry Stir
has now come up here, to Earth's old sanctuary

108. *Ifi er mer á, at ec vera en kominn
iotna gordom or, ef ec Gunnladar ne nytac,
ennar godo kono, theirrar er lagdomc arm yfir*

I doubt that I would have come back
from the halls of giants, if I had not used Gunnlöd
- that good woman, whom I put my arms around

109. *Ens hindra dags gengo hrimthursar
Hava ráths at fregna, Hava hallo i;
at Balverci theur spurdo,
ef hann veri med barndom cominn
etha hefði hanom Suttungr of sóit*

From the next day on the frost-ogres went
to ask advice from the High One, in the High One's hall
about Harm-Doer they asked
if he had come among the binding powers [the gods]
or if he had died by Suttungr's hands

110. *Báugeith Ódinn hygg ek at unnit hafij
Hvat skal hans trygdom trua?
Suttung svikinn hann let sumbli fra
oc grotta Gunnlado.*

A ring-oath, I believe that Ódinn swore
who can now trust his words?
he stole Suttungr's drink by treason
and made Gunnlöd weep

³²⁵ *hugr*: soul, spirit, will, intent, desire, thought, heart, love

Appendix II to chapter 4.2: *Hávamál* st. 138-141

138. *Veit ec at ec hecc vindga meidi a
netr alla nio, geiri undathr
oc gefinn Odni, sialfr sialfom mer
a theim meithi, er mangi veit
hvers hann af rótom renn*

I know that I hung in the wind-swept tree
nine whole nights, stabbed with spears
and given to Ódinn, given self to myself
on that tree of which few know
from where its roots run

139. *Vith hleifi mic seldo
ne vith hornigi, nysta ec nithr,
nam ec up rúnar,
opandi nam, fell ec aprt thadan*

No bread was given to me
they brought no horn - I peered down
I took up the runes
screaming I took them, then I fell back there

140. *Fimbulliod nío nam ec enom ;
fregia syni Balthorns, Bestla fathir
oc ec dryc of gat ens dyra miathar
asinn Odreri*

Nine powerful spell-songs I learned from
the famous son of Bolthorn, Bestla's father
and I had a drink of precious mead
served from Poetry Stir

141. *Tha nam ec frovaz
oc frothr vera, oc vaxa oc vel hafaz;
ord mer af ordi orz leitadi
verc mer af verki verks leitadi*

Then I learned to be wise
and to be learned; and grow, and to live well
words from words found more words to me
deed from deeds found more deeds for me

Appendix III to chapter 4.4: *Vafthrudnismál* st. 36-37 about the Eagle Corpse Swallower and the Origin of the Winds in the World

36. *“Ódinn quad:
Segdu that ith niunda, allz thik svinnan queda,
oc thu, Vafthrudnir, vitir:
hvadan vindr um komr, svá at ferr vág yfir?
e menn hann sialfan um síá?”*

Ódinn spoke:
Tell me the ninth, all say you are wise
and you, Vafthrudnir, know:
From where comes the wind that
moves across waves which men never see in itself?

37. *Vafthrudnir quad:
Hræsvelgr heitir, er sitr a himins enda,
iotunn i arnar ham;
af hans vengiome queda vind koma
alla menn yfir.”*

Vafthrudnir spoke:
He is called Corpse-Swallower, who sits
at the end of heaven – a giant in eagle's body
From his wings, it is said, the wind blows
over all human beings.”

Appendix IV to chapter 4.6: Snorri about all the arts of Ódinn – Ódinn as divine archetype

6. It has been said, and it should be true, that when Ás-Ódinn and with him the *diar* [gods] came to the Northern countries, they took up and taught the sports that people have been practicing a long time afterwards. Ódinn was the greatest, and from him they learned the sports, for he knew them first, all of them, at least most of them. (...) he spoke so well and so smoothly that everybody who heard what he said, thought that to be the only truth. He said everything with rhyme, just like people now speak forth what is called poetry; he and his sacrificial priests are called verse-smiths, for it was with them that the art came up to the Northern countries. Ódinn could do this during a battle, that his enemies became blind or deaf or filled with terror, and their weapons did not bite more than sticks, but his own men went without armor and were crazy like dogs or wolves, they bit their shields, were strong as bears or oxen; they killed all the people, and neither fire nor iron could harm them – that is called to go berserk.

7. Ódinn could change shape; then his body lay like dead or sleeping, but he himself was bird or four-legged animal, fish or serpent, and could travel in an instant to distant countries, in his own service or for the sake of others. He could also do other things, only with words could he quench a fire, calm the ocean and turn the wind wherever he wanted. (...) He had with him the head of Mimir, it told him the news from all the worlds beyond; sometimes he woke up the dead from the earth or sat below a hanged man (...) He had two ravens, which he had taught to speak, and they flew widely across the lands and told him the news. From all this he became greatly wise.

All these arts did he teach to others through runes and through a kind of songs called *galdr* [spell-songs] (...) Ódinn knew that sport which contains the greatest power, and he practiced it himself; it is called *seidr*, and from it he could know the destinies of people, and things that had yet to happen, and he could give to people death or accident or bad health, he could take the wit or the power from people and give to others. But this sorcery implies a lot of unmanliness for those who practice it, so that men-folk could not practice it without shame, and they taught it to the priestesses.

Ódinn (...) knew songs that could get everything to open up for him; earth and mountain, rock and mounds, and he bound with words those who dwelled in there, entered and took what he wanted.[my outlining](...) Most of his arts he taught to the sacrificial priests, and they were next to him in wisdom and magical arts.(...) (Snorres Kongesagaer, 1944, p. 5, 6 my translation from the Norwegian)

Appendix V to chapter 4.8: *Skírnismál* st.10: Skírnir speaks to his Horse about the Dark and Dewy Road the Giant World and the “too Powerful Giant”

Skírnir mælti við hestinn:

*10, Myrct er úti, mal queth ec ocr fara
vrig fioll yfir
thursa thioth yfir
badir við comumc, eda ocr bada tecr
sa inn amatki iotunn*

Skírnir said to the horse:

It is dark outside, I say it is time for us to go
over the dewy mountain
to rush over the thurse’s worlds:
we will both come back, or the too powerful giant
will take us both

Appendix VI: to chapter 5: What Snorri says about Freyia in the *Gylfaginning*

Njord of Noatun had afterwards two children. The son was called Freyr and the daughter Freyia. They were beautiful in appearance and mighty. (...) Freyia is the most glorious of the Asyniur [goddesses]. She has a dwelling in heaven called Folkvangar, and wherever she rides to battle she gets half the slain, and the other half Ódinn, as it says here: There is a place called Folkvang,[People`s Field] and there Freyia is in charge of allotting seats in the hall. Half the slain she chooses each day, and half has Ódinn.

Sessrumnir [”Seat-Roomer”], her hall, it is large and beautiful. And when she travels she drives two cats and sits in a chariot. She is the most approachable one for people to pray to, and from her name is derived the honorific title whereby noble ladies are called *fróvur* (noble ladies) She is very fond of love songs. It is good to pray to her concerning love affairs.³²⁶

Freyia is highest in rank [among the goddesses] next to Frigg. She was married to someone called Od[”Poem”, ”Ecstasy”, ”Spirit”] (...) Od went on long travels, and Freya stayed behind weeping, and her tears are red gold. Freya has many names, and the reason for this is that she adopted various names when she was traveling among stranger peoples looking for Od. She is called Mardoll [”Dazzling Ocean”] and Horn [”Flax”], Gefn [”Bestower”], Syr [”Sow”]. Freya owned the Brising`s [Flame`s] necklace. She is known as Lady of the Vanir [*Vanadís*]³²⁷

Appendix VII to chapter 5.1: First stanza of *Hyndluljóð* – Freyia`s invocation

Freyia kvad:

*I. Vaki mæ r meyia, vaki min vina
Hyndla systir! er i helli byr;
nu er rauckr rauckra,
rida vit skulum til Valhallar
ok til vess heilags.*

Freyia spoke:

Wake up, maid of maidens, wake up my girlfriend
She-Dog, sister! Who lives in the rock cave!
Now is the darkness of darkness itself
We ought to ride to Val-hall
and to the holy sanctuaries.

Appendix VIII to chapter 5. : First stanza of *Gróagaldur* – Svípdag`s invocation

Sonr kvad:

*I. Vaki thú, Gróa! vaki thú, gód kona!
vek ek thik daudra dura;
ef thú that mant, at thu thinn mög bædir
til kumbldysjar koma.*

The son spoke:

Wake up, Gróa! Wake up, good woman!
I wake you by the doors of death;
if you remember that you told your son
to go to the burial mound.

³²⁶ Faulkes, 1987, p. 24

³²⁷ Faulkes, 1987, p. 29-30. The translations of the names are taken from Simek, 1996, and Norrøn Ordbok.

Appendix IX to chapter 6: *Voluspá* st. 20 on the Three Norns from the Well of Urdr (Carving the Runes of Fate into the World Tree)

“*Thadan koma meyar
margs vitandi
Thrjár, ór theim sal
er undr tholli stendr
Urd hétu eina, adra Verdandi
skáru a skídi
Skuld ina thridju;
Thær lög lógdu, thær líf kuru
alda börnum, örlog segja*”

“from there (The Well of Urdr) come the maidens
who know much
three, from that hall
which stands beneath the tree
Urd (Origin) is the one called, the other *Verdandi* (Becoming)
they cut (runes) in the wood
Skuld (Debt) the third
they made the laws, they chose lives
for the children of the ages, to decide fate”

Appendix X to chapter 6.4: *Helgakvida Hundingsbani II* st. 43: Sigrún Compares Herself to the Hungry Ravens of Ódinn

“*Nu em ec sva fegin fyndi ocrom
sem átfrekir Othins haucar, er val vito,
varmar bradir, etha daugglitir dagsbrún síá*”

“Now I am as happy at our meeting
like the hungry hawks of Odin when they know slaughter
hot food, or, dew [=blood] -drenched they see the dawn”

[They then drink “the precious drink” (*dyrar veigar*) and sleep together in the burial mound before Helgi goes back to Valhall. Both Helgi and Sigrun are said to be reincarnated.]

Appendix XI to chapter 7.2: *Helgakvida Hjörvardssonar* st. 20 on Atli's castration...

20. *Gneggia mundit thu, Atli!
ef thu geldr ne verir,
brettir sinn Hrimgerdr hala;
(...)*

You would have neighed, Atli!
if you were not castrated,
Hrimgerdr is raising up her tail;
(...)

...and *Helgakvida Hundingsbani I* st. 40 on Sinfiotli's castration

Gudmund quad:

Gudmund said:

40. *Fadir varattu fenrisulfa,
ollom ellri
sva at ec muna, sizt dik geldo
fyr Gnipalundi tursameuiar.
Torsnesi*

40. You did not father the Fenris-wolves
even if you are older than all of them
As far as I remember, you were castrated
in the Gnipa-Grove by thurse-maidens, *a*
at the Peak of Thorr

Appendix XII to chapter 8.1: *Grottasöngur* st. 10-18: The song of the giantesses Fenja ("Heath-Dweller") and Menja ("Necklace-Bearer")

10. *Komia Grotti or gria fialli
ne sa hinn harthi hallr or iorthu
ne moli sva mæR bergrisa
ef vissi vitt vetr til hennar*

The Mill-Stone would not have emerged from the gray mountains
nor would the hard stone block have come out of the earth
Nor would the rock-giants' maidens have grinded
if we had not known about the Mill-Stone's design

11. *Vær vetr niu vorum leikur
aufligar alnar fyrir iord nethan;
stothu meyar at meginverkum
færthum sialfar setberg or stad*

Nine winters we sisters grew
playing within the depths of the earth
the maidens desired to commit great deeds
we ourselves moved the flat-topped rock on its way

12. *Velltum grioti of gard risa
sva at fold firir for skialfandi;
sva slongum vit snudga steini,
hofga halli at halir tocu*

We rolled the boulder from the giant's court
so that the earth went forth, shaking
Thus we turned the fast revolving stone
and gave to men's hands the hard boulder

13. *En vit sithan a Svitthiodu
framvisar tvær i folk stigum
sneiddum brynjur en brutum skioldu
gengum i gegnum
graserkiat lit*

But later we, in the Svitjod-land [Sweden]
the prophetic two, towards the multitudes we moved
we cut armor, we broke shields
we traveled through
the gray-clothed armies [the dead (my remark)]

14. *Stethum stilli, studdum annan(...)*

We overthrew one, supported another (...)

15. *Framm heldum thvi thau misseri
at vid kappum kenndar vorum(...)*

We continued this for various seasons
so we became well-known for our deeds (...)

16. *Nu erum komnar til konungs husa
miskunnarlausar oc at mani hafthar (...)*

Now we have come to the house of the king
treated without mercy, and held like slaves (...)

17. (...) *nu muna hondum hvild vel gefa
adr fullmalit Frotha thycki*

(...) now our hands may not rest
until Frodi thinks it is fully grounded

18. *Hendr skolo hölda hardar trionor
vapm valdreyrug, vaki thu, Frothi!
Vaki thu Frothi! ef thu hlytha vill
songum ockrum oc sagum fornum.*

Hands shall hold the hard shafts
weapons blood-stained; wake up now, Frodi!
wake up now, Frodi, if you wish to listen
to our songs and our ancient tales.

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