



Communications

The Retrospective Methods Network

RMN

Newsletter

RMN Newsletter 17 (2022): 44–54

Mímir's Head as Skull Cup, the Conclusion of the Æsir-Vanir War and the Drink of Sovereignty

Emily Lyle, University of Edinburgh

Abstract: The proposal offered here goes some way towards reconciling the main divergent accounts centred on Mímir, the one concerning his well and the other concerning his severed head (Simpson 1962–65). The missing link is the assumed preservation of the head by removing flesh from the skull rather than by mummifying it. A form of the Mímir story in the Æsir-Vanir war is posited in which Mímir's head was preserved as a skull cup and interaction with it was through drinking from it. This in turn offers fresh insights on the drink it contained both in myth and in the ritual of inauguration.

Skull Cups

In his entry on Mímir in *Norse Mythology*, John Lindow points to an article by A. LeRoy Andrews and says (2002: 232): '[Andrews] offered a satisfyingly romantic interpretation, making Mímir's head a drinking skull (there is, sad to report, no evidence of drinking from skulls).'

Lindow's dismissal of the idea of 'a drinking vessel fashioned from the skull of Mímir' offered by Andrews (1928: 168) may owe something to a negative response to the misconception that the vikings drank from skulls which stemmed from Ole Worm's mistaken understanding of the lines in *Krákumál* 25 (McTurk 2017: 706):

Drekkum bjór af bragði
ór bjúgvíðum hausa.

Worm in his *Runir seu Danica Literatura Antiquissima* (1651: 203) translated them as:

Bibemus cerevisiam brevi
Ex concavis crateribus craniorum.

We will soon drink beer
from the hollow drinking cups of skulls (My translation).

In his commentary Worm added: "*Hausa* crania. Sperabant Heroes se in aula Othini bibituros ex craniis eorum quos occiderant."

[*'Hausa* skulls. The Heroes hoped to drink in Óðinn's hall from the skulls of those whom they had killed' (My translation)]. It is recognized today that the reference is to drinking horns not skulls, as shown in the translation by Rory McTurk (2017: 706) where the meaning of the kenning is given in capitals:

We'll soon be drinking beer
out of the curved trees of skulls [DRINKING
HORNS].

However, in spite of Worm's misconception, and granted that skull cups were not in everyday use by vikings living or dead, the exceptional use of skulls for drinking cannot be ruled out. Skull drinking cups feature memorably in the story of the smith Völundr, who takes his revenge on Niðuðr by killing his two sons (or two of his three sons) and sending cups made from their skulls to their father, as related in *Völundarkviða* 25 and *Þiðriks saga af Bern* (Bertelsen 1905–11, I, 119). Drinking cups were also made from the skulls of the two sons of Atli and Guðrún as related in *Atlamál in groenlenzco* 82, *Skáldskaparmál* 42 and *Völsunga saga* (Finch 1965: 72).

In a broader Germanic context, according to Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, Alboin, king of the Lombards, had a cup made from the skull of Cunimund, king of the

Gepids, after he defeated him at the battle of Asfeld in 567 CE. Paul the Deacon wrote:

In this battle Alboin killed Cunimund, and made out of his head, which he carried off, a drinking goblet. This kind of a goblet is called among them ‘scala,’ but in the Latin language ‘patera.’ (Foulke 1907: 51)

Foulke is using ‘goblet’ in its now obsolete sense of a cup without a stem and base. The Roman *patera* was a shallow dish for libations and drinking.

A case among the Celtic Boii of Cisalpine Gaul demonstrates the ritual use of a skull-cup formed from the head of the leader of their opponents. The Boii destroyed two Roman legions in an ambush at the Battle of Silva Litana in 216 CE during the Second Punic War and the Roman general Lucius Postumius Albinus was killed. Livy gives this account of what followed:

The Boii, having cut off his head, carried it and the spoils they stripped off his body, in triumph into the most sacred temple they had. Afterwards they cleansed the head according to their custom, and having covered the skull with chased gold, used it as a cup for libations in their solemn festivals, and a drinking cup for their high priests and other ministers of the temple. (Livy 23.24, Spillan & Edmonds 1849).

Herodotus, in his description of the Scythians, gives a clear account of the making of the skull cups and shows that they were made from the heads of kin as well as of outsiders:

The heads ... of their bitterest enemies, they treat this way. Each saws off all the part beneath the eyebrows, and cleans the rest. If he is a poor man, then he covers the outside with a piece of raw hide, and so makes use of it; but if he is rich, he covers the head with the raw hide, and gilds the inside of it and uses it for a drinking-cup. Such a cup a man also makes out of the head of his own kinsman with whom he has been feuding, and whom he has defeated in single combat before the king; and if guests whom he honors visit him he will serve them with these heads, and show how the dead were his kinsfolk who fought him and were beaten by him; this they call manly valor. (Herodotus 4.65, Godley 1921)

Having seen how and when skull cups were made, and what use was made of them, the

topic of Mimir’s possible connection with a skull cup can be taken up again.

Mimir’s Head and Mimir’s Well

A passage from *Ynglinga saga* chapter 7 shows Óðinn employing Mimir’s head as one of the means of associating with the dead.

Óðinn hafði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi ór ǫðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga. Fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn.

Óðinn kept Mimir’s head by him, and it told him much news from other worlds, and sometimes he awakened the dead from the earth or sat himself under hanged men. Because of this he was called *draugadróttinn* (‘lord of ghosts’) or *hangadróttinn* (‘lord of the hanged’) (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 10).

Although Mimir is called *inn vitrasti maðr* [‘a very wise man’] in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 4, it does not seem that there is any necessity to think that he had been considered wise when he was alive, since the specific knowledge that he has belongs to the world of the dead. Once he has been killed, he can communicate that knowledge to the living, as put in context by Stephen Mitchell (2017: 291). As an entire mummified head, he could be imagined as communicating in speech through his mouth. If the link with the dead man, and so with the knowledge of the dead, was through the upper part of the skull used as a dish or cup, communication would more likely be through what it contained. In this way a link would be made with the large container, the well of knowledge presided over by Mimir as described in *Völuspá* 29 and *Gylfaginning* 15.

The story of the bargain by which Óðinn gives one of his eyes in exchange for knowledge from the well is probably a fresh creation which replaced an earlier cosmic treatment of Óðinn’s eye that can be made out in the stories of Geirrøðr, Balar and Ysbaddaden Chief Giant.¹ However, the idea that the well is a source of knowledge is an independent one that is relevant in this discussion.

Other elements that remain of interest in the accounts of the well are that the liquid in the

well is mead and that the drinker does not drink directly from the well but from a vessel that has been filled from it. The vessel is called a horn by Snorri and this might seem to be in contradiction to the skull cup, but it can be noted that the two objects are functionally the same although differing in shape. It can be noted, too, that the horn used for drinking was part of an animal skull as a skull cup was part of a human skull, and both could be replicated in metal without any component of horn or bone. Accordingly, we have a situation where the concept of the skull cup could have been retained in the drinking horn (which differed in shape but had the same function) and in a metal bowl (which had the same shape but differed in material of composition) or, in fact, from a metal horn which differed in both respects from a cup made from a human skull.

In *Sigurdrífumál* 14, Óðinn is said to have derived thought runes from liquid that dripped

ór hausi Heiðdraupnis
ok ór horni Hoddrofnis.

from Heiðdraupnir's skull
and from Hoddrofnir's horn (Trans.
Larrington 2014: 164).

These lines seem to equate skull and horn. The two names are otherwise unknown but have been thought to be names of Mimir (Bellows 1923: 393).² Larrington notes: “the liquid referred to here may be identical in some way with the mead of poetry” (2014: 304).

The Conclusion of the Æsir-Vanir War

The exchange of hostages at the conclusion of the Æsir-Vanir war in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 4 appears to be an addition to the underlying myth but it does include one suggestive feature at the point where Mimir's head is concerned:

Þá tóku þeir Mími ok hálshjoggu ok sendu hofuðit Ásum. Óðinn tók hofuðit ok smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þar yfir galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við hann ok sagði honum marga leynda hluti.

Then they [the Vanir] took Mimir and beheaded him and sent his head to the Æsir. Óðinn took the head and smeared it with herbs that prevented it from decaying, and recited spells over it and imbued it with magic power so that it spoke to him and told

him many secret things (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 7–8).

According to this passage, it was Mimir's entire head that was sent by the Vanir to the Æsir and received by Óðinn, but if it was a skull cup that was being carried it could have been filled with mead and the movement here seems significant. When the action of conveying a cup of mead from one opposed faction to the other is related to the ending of a war, it seems as if this action may bring it about and seal the agreement. The person carrying the cup also acquires significance, and it is suggested here that the cupbearer was a woman, as was quite common in ceremonial situations (Enright 2013), and that the reconciliation between the Æsir and the Vanir included the creation of a marriage-bond, which was often the means of bringing warring parties together.

This suggestion has the virtue of giving a motivation for the fighting to stop. As the narrative stands in *Ynglinga saga*, it is not at all clear why the exchange of hostages, with bad faith on the side of the Æsir in providing the inadequate hostage Hœnir and the retaliatory murder of the hostage Mimir by the Vanir, should lead to reconciliation. If the Vanir sent out a woman with the cup of sovereignty (discussed below) to offer to one of the Æsir who would thus become king of the whole newly formed community, a reconciliation becomes intelligible. And here it is worth pausing to consider the Æsir-Vanir war together with the Roman-Sabine war to which it has been compared, mainly in relation to the work of Georges Dumézil.

Lindow noted that Dumézil first thought of his three functions of the sacred, physical force and prosperity as being tied to the social classes of nobles, warriors and farmers but later considered them to be ideological constructs.³ Lindow then went on to express his appreciation of Dumézil's assessment of the Æsir-Vanir war:

[P]erhaps the major contribution of Dumézil's analysis of Old Norse mythology was to show convincingly that the war between the Æsir and Vanir was an ideological myth, not the reflection of an actual war between groups with different cult practices, as had been the prevailing view in

the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries.
(Lindow 2021: 134)

C. Scott Littleton gave first place to the same component of Dumézil's work in his discussion of it in the Old Norse context:

Closely associated with [his] tripartite model of the Indo-European ideology are several specific themes worthy of note. One involves the concept of a war pitting representatives of the first two functions against those of the third The best examples of this theme are found in the Roman account of the Sabine War – which, like most of early Roman 'history,' is but historicized myth – and the Norse myth of the conflict between the Æsir (Odin, Tyr, Thor, et al.) and the Vanir (Frey, Njord, et al.).⁴

Littleton adds in a note that 'the third-function group is reconciled to the rest of the system, and there is an honorable peace'.

It is worth observing what it is that brings about this peace in the Roman-Sabine case, for it may have a bearing on the present discussion. The war began when the Romans abducted Sabine women and made them their wives. Some years later, as Plutarch reports, when there was a lull during a battle, the Sabine women rushed between the two armies and called on their fathers on the one side and their husbands on the other to desist from fighting and make peace, and this was accordingly done (Plutarch, *Romulus* 19, Perrin 1914). In this rather unconventional way, a marriage alliance was formed, and I suggest that underlying the account of hostages in the Old Norse case there was the creation of a tie through marriage.

This possibility raises a fundamental question. If this had been the event that ended the war, why was it not retained? My answer is that it related to the marriage of Þórr and Freyja, and that the whole Germanic pantheistic system which had once centred on Þórr as king was realigned at some point in history when Óðinn, starting from his position as war god, acquired the role of sovereign and Þórr and Freyja, instead of being a couple, were given the lesser substitutes of Sif and Oðr as partners. This is a vast topic which I have begun to explore in the light of the theory that structuring like that picked up by Dumézil was formed in a tribal society millennia before the

Christian era,⁵ and that, in the Old Norse case, study of the structure can give access to an earlier layer of narrative and meaning than the extant literary texts provide. In the tribal context, it would be no surprise to find both the antagonism expressed in war and its resolution through marriage, since intermarrying moieties may be opposed to each other and anthropologists report statements like "We marry those whom we fight" (Barnard & Good 1984: 139).

The princess chooses the man who is to be her husband by approaching him in the assembly and offering him drink from the cup she carries in two slightly varying accounts of the foundation of Massilia (now Marseille), in Gaul, which is a notable instance of this Indo-European custom in the Celtic context (McCone 1990: 111; Lyle 2008: 358–360). The practice ties in well with the matrilineal system of succession which is implied in the pronouncement of the mythical Irish king Eochaid Fedlech that "no son should rule Ireland after his father for ever" (O'Neill 1905, 174–175, quoted in Lyle 2016: 138). Patrilineal succession is more evident historically in Indo-European societies, but it should be noted that, in spite of the foregrounding of the female implicit in matrilineal succession, the system recognizes the patriline and that it encourages inheritance from a grandfather so that transformation from a matrilineal system to the more fully attested patrilineal one would be facilitated.

The Drink of Sovereignty

Even without the suggestion of a cup of drink offered in a marriage ceremony, it was clear that mead stood in some sort of relationship to the ending of the Æsir-Vanir war. As Lindow observes:

It is important to recall ... that the outcome of the settlement between Æsir and Vanir was not only the incorporation of the two groups, but also the creation of the mead of poetry. This substance is what made wisdom and memory possible, since both were encoded in verse (Lindow 2021: 34).

The story of Mímir's head in *Ynglinga saga* given above is told in the context of a war between humans but the Æsir and Vanir are presented as gods when the theme of the mead

of poetry is introduced in *Skáldskaparmál* G57 in response to a question about the craft of poetry:

Þat vǫru upphöf til þess at guðin höfðu ósaett við þat fólk er Vanir heita, en þeir lögðu með sér friðstefnu ok settu grið á þá lund at þeir gengu hvárirtveggju til eins kers ok spýttu í hráka sínum.

The origin of it was that the gods had a dispute with the people called Vanir, and they appointed a peace-conference and made a truce by this procedure, that both sides went up to a vat and spat their spittle into it (Trans. Faulkes 1995: 61).

The story then takes a loop, returning at a later point to Ásgarð where the liquid that had its basis in the peace-making spittle was caught in vats. This narrative composition can be brought out by a summary of the key points relevant to this discussion.

The spittle of the gods as a symbol of truce was regarded as so precious that the gods formed it into a man called Kvasir who had great knowledge and travelled about the world teaching. He was killed by two dwarfs who used his blood to make mead.

[Fjalars ok Galars] létu renna blóð hans í tvau ker ok einn ketil, ok heitir sá Óðreyrir, en kerin heita Són ok Boðn. Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjöðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða frœðamaðr.

[Fialar and Galar] poured his blood into two vats and a pot, and the latter was called Odrerir, but the vats were called Son and Bodn. They mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar (Trans. Faulkes 1995: 62).

A giant called Suttungr got the vessels of mead from the dwarfs, and he kept them within a mountain where they were guarded by his daughter, Gunnlōð. Óðinn made his way into the mountain and lay with Gunnlōð for three nights and she allowed him to drink three draughts of the mead.

Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann al<t> ór Óðreri, en í qðrum ór Boðn, í inu<m> þriðja ór Són, ok hafði hann þá allan mjöðinn.

In the first draught he drank everything out of Odrerir, and in the second out of Bodn, in the

third out of Son, and then he had all the mead (Trans. Faulkes 1995: 63).

He escaped from the mountain pursued by Suttungr, both of them in the shape of eagles. When Óðinn arrived back at Ásgarð he spat out nearly all the drink into vats that the gods had put out ready to receive it and so made it available to the Æsir and to poets. In his fright, however, Óðinn sent some of the mead backwards and this is the drink of poetasters.

Svava Jakobsdóttir, working with the parallel story in *Hávamál*, points out that, whereas Snorri is treating the mead of poetry, the brief treatment at *Hávamál* 105 should be interpreted as applying to the drink of sovereignty:

Gunnlōð mér um gaf
gullnum stóli á
drykk ins dýra mjaðar[.]

Gunnlod gave me on her golden throne a drink of the precious mead (Trans. Larrington 2014: 26).

After Gunnlōð has offered the sovereignty to Óðinn in this way, she has intercourse with him as indicated at *Hávamál* 108. Svava observes (2002: 34):

As far as the mead itself is concerned, it is worth noting that nowhere in *Hávamál* is it either associated with the art of poetry or intended particularly for poets and scholars, as it is in *Snorra Edda*. In the two stanzas where it is mentioned, stanzas 105 and 140, it is not called anything other than ‘inn dýri miðr’ (the precious mead). *Hávamál*’s precious mead is able to do something other than make men into poets or scholars.

Svava defines what this “something other” is when she says in her conclusion that “*Hávamál*’s ‘precious mead’ has to do with kings”, and she compares with Irish stories where a goddess-figure called ‘Sovereignty’ gives the hero authority to reign by granting him mead and lying with him. Karen Bek-Pedersen draws on Svava’s work in her study of the norns and finds that the motif of a royal consecration ceremony “does seem to be latently present” in *Hávamál* (2011: 102). Following this, Bek-Pedersen reflects (2011: 103):

The mead, of poetry or of sovereignty, is not an exact equivalent to Urðarbrunnr [‘Weird’s well’, Faulkes 1995: 19], but there is a level of correspondence nonetheless. The mead seems to relate especially clearly to Mímisbrunnr [‘Mímir’s well’] with its connotations of wisdom and knowledge and as the object of Óðinn’s quest in *Völuspá* 46, where he seeks out Mímisbrunnr to get counsel from Mímir. Thus, Óðinn seeks out three wells with similar intentions: Mímisbrunnr in *Völuspá* 46 and *Gylfaginning* 51; Urðarbrunnr in *Hávamál* 111; and Gunnlōð’s mead in *Hávamál* 104–10. All three sources of liquid are connected to wisdom and to some kind of power, be it in the form of knowledge or sovereignty.

It is valuable to consider the attributes of the various sources in this way. The mead of poetry is equatable with the mead of wisdom and knowledge as indicated here and in the quotation from Lindow at the beginning of this section, but it seems possible to distinguish it from the mead of sovereignty and Snorri’s account suggests how this can be done through its mention of three containers and three draughts. Þórr also drinks three draughts on his visit to the court of the giant Útgarðaloki in *Gylfaginning* 46 and the original context of this motif may have been his claim to the kingship. The Indo-European king embodied all three of the functions of the sacred, physical force and prosperity (Lincoln 1986: 160–161), and so a drink taken in three draughts might symbolically secure all three capacities for him. The drink of the poets would then be only one of the three draughts and would be the one corresponding to the sacred which was most highly valued, while the drink of sovereignty would be all three together. As part of the magnification of the role of Óðinn from his basic identity as war god he became poet as well as king and so both the specific draught of poetry and wisdom and the triple drink of sovereignty were appropriated by him. There also seems to be a trace of his original connection with the warrior function in the toasts drunk at royal inauguration feasts in Scandinavia.

The Inaugural Triple Toast as Genealogical Claim to the Right to Inherit

The discussion in this section rests in part on the premise that ritual in medieval Scandinavia may have retained traces of the importance of a shallow lineage that reflected the shallow lineage of the gods, although the fictive genealogies of the Scandinavian kings actually reached back over many generations and linked them to the gods as progenitors in the pagan context and to Adam in the Christian context. This awareness of deep historical time was not available in the thought-world of the totally oral culture in which the Proto-Indo-Europeans created their cosmology. A king had to establish his authority through a link to the divine (Helms 1998: 7, 37–39, 75–76), but this could be done with a quite shallow lineage, and it seems that the Proto-Indo-Europeans had the concept of a kindred reaching back to only three generations before the present and that royal succession was matrilineal with two patrilineal royal lines descending from the ancestress (Lyle 2012a). While the matrilineal concept was still in force, these two lines supplied the king in alternate generations; when this concept was lost the result could be two separate lines with patrilineal inheritance, as is perhaps to be found in the Scandinavian context with lines stemming from Óðinn and Freyr (Steinsland 2011).

With a shallow matrilineal lineage, each new king needed only to establish a link to the two kings who immediately preceded him – his maternal uncle and his grandfather – and to his father who provided the biological link to the grandfather. In myth, these can be treated as the ‘three fathers’ of the king (Lyle 2012a: 62–66, 77–78). It is argued here that the claimant, when accepted, enters into the role played in the theogony by Þórr, who held the position of king before this was transferred to Óðinn. The claimant’s legitimacy is established by his genealogical connection to three male predecessors who correspond to three gods belonging to the generations before Þórr.

To study the divine side of the equation, it is necessary to distinguish the old gods from their successors. According to Snorri’s account in *Gylfaginning* 6, the originating female Bestla bore three sons called Óðinn, Vili and Vé, and Óðinn is clearly one of the old gods

and has adult sons in the mythological literature. Njörðr is also a father god; his name was possibly an alternative for the name Vili, and Týr was possibly an alternative name for the god called Vé. The sequence in the Scylding dynasty found in Saxo and *Beowulf* indicates that the three male predecessors were in two generations, and Týr seems the best fit for the grandfather role and Óðinn for that of the mother's brother (Lyle 2012a: 81; 2021b).

The inauguration of a king was the occasion of his marriage, as discussed above, but it was also the funeral feast commemorating his predecessor and it is possible to explore this feast in medieval Scandinavian sources (Sundqvist 2002: 239–255; 2022). One of the elements in the choice of a king was his descent and historically an extended genealogy might have been presented at inaugurations (Sundqvist 2002: 136–159). The suggestion made here is that the inaugural ritual may also have retained the 'three fathers' sequence in its rites of legitimation through the ceremonial offering of three draughts of drink. The appropriate equivalent divine recipients of the three drink-offerings made in Scandinavia, in the terms set out above, would be Óðinn, Njörðr and Týr. I suggest that the force of the drink-offerings can be understood through this interpretation, but the evidence is slight and actual practice in the medieval period is unlikely to have had all the necessary components, especially with regard to Týr, whose role appears to have been substantially taken over by Óðinn.

However, the available literature does include material of great value, including the account in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 36 of a feast held at Uppsala by the legendary King Ingjaldr to commemorate his father King Qnundr.

Þat var síðvenja í þann tíma, þar er erfi skyldi gera eptir konunga eða jarla, þá skyldi sá, er gerði ok til arfs skyldi leiða, sitja á skörinni fyrir hásetinu allt þar til, er inn væri borit full, þat er kallat var bragafull, skyldi sá þá standa upp í móti bragafulli ok strengja heit, drekka af fullit síðan, síðan skyldi hann leiða í háseti, þat sem átti faðir hans. Var hann þá kominn til arfs alls eptir hann. Nú var svá hér gort, at þá er bragafull kom inn, stóð upp Ingjaldr konungr ok tók við einu miklu dýrshorni, strengði hann þá heit, at hann

skyldi auka ríki sitt hálfu í hverja höfuðátt eða deyja ella, drakk af síðan af horninu.

It was customary at that time that when commemorative feasts were being held for kings or jarls, the one who was holding it and was about to come into his inheritance must sit on the step in front of the high seat right on until the toast that was called *bragarfull* was carried in; he was then to stand up to receive the *bragarfull* and swear an oath, then drink off the toast, and then he was to be set in the high seat that his father had had. Then he had entered fully into the inheritance after him. On this occasion it was done in such a way that when the *bragarfull* came in, Ingjaldr stood up and took a large animal's horn, then swore an oath that he would extend his kingdom to double the size in all four directions or die in the attempt, and then drank off the contents of the horn (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 37).

In this account, the heir was in position, seated on the step in front of the high seat, but the action began when the special drinking vessel "was carried in". Nothing is said of who carried it in, but in the schema offered here it was when the royal woman brought in the special drinking vessel that the ceremony proceeded. After taking the vessel, Ingjaldr swore an oath and drank off the toast.

In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter 35, where Snorri gives an account of Sveinn Forkbeard's funeral feast for his father Haraldr the toast and the oath are both mentioned, though in the reverse order, and there is the important additional information that three toasts were drunk – first to King Haraldr and then to Christ and St Michael.

Fyrsta dag at veizlunni, áðr Sveinn konungr stigi í háseti fōður síns, þá drakk hann minni hans ok strengði heit, áðr þrír vetr væri liðnir, at hann skyldi kominn með her sinn til Englands ok drepa Aðalráð konung eða reka hann ór landi. Þat minni skyldu allir drekka, þeir er at erfinu váru. ... En er þat minni var af drukkit, þá skyldi drekka Krists minni allir men, [...]. It þriðja var Mikjál's minni, ok drukku þat allir.

The first day at the banquet, before King Sveinn was to go up into his father's high-seat, he drank his toast and made a vow that before three winters had passed he would have come with his army to England and have killed King Aðalráðr or driven him from the

country. Everyone who was at the memorial banquet had to drink that toast. ... And when that toast had been drunk, then everyone had to drink Christ's toast, [...]. The third one was Mikjáll's toast, and everyone drank that (Trans. Finlay and Faulkes 2011–16: 170).

The Christian overlay is absent from the earlier version of King Sveinn's funeral feast in *Fagrskinna* chapter 20 where the men at the feast drank *enum rikustu fraendum sínum. eða Þór eða qðrum guðum sínum, þá er heiðni var* ['to their most important kinsmen, or to Þórr, or to other of their gods, in heathen times' (Trans. Finlay 2004: 97)]. This is a general statement but the names of three heathen gods are given in the more specific report in *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 14 where three toasts are mentioned as in Snorri's account of King Sveinn's feast:

[E]r gerði veizluna ok hofðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn, skyldi fyrst Óðins full – skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar.

[T]he one who was holding the banquet and who was the chief person there, he had then to dedicate the toast and all the ritual food; first would be Óðinn's toast – that was drunk to victory and to the power of the king – and then Njörðr's toast and Freyr's toast for prosperity and peace (Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2011–16: 98).

As a young god, Freyr is not relevant in the genealogical context and is a duplicate of Njörðr here with both gods being called on for the same result. The pagan triple toast might once have been completed by a toast to Týr, who is regarded as the god of the sacred, and have related to the knowledge that has been found to be one of the necessary attainments of a king (Sundqvist 2002: 156; Fleck 1970).

If the idea of ancestors was present and was being loosely applied to the king, offering the toasts might have named any predecessors of note rather than his immediate relatives but the basic shape of the pagan triple toast can perhaps be expressed in the following formulation that I offer as a hypothetical example and have put in the mouth of Sveinn Forkbeard:

I drink first to the memory of my father, King Haraldr, and to Óðinn for victory. I drink

second to the memory of my [relationship and name] and to Njörðr for prosperity. I drink third to the memory of my [relationship and name] and to Týr for knowledge.

In a matrilineal system, the comparable series would be:

1. Toast to mother's brother and Óðinn for victory.
2. Toast to father and Njörðr for prosperity.
3. Toast to grandfather and Týr for knowledge.

By making three toasts of this kind, the new king would have connected himself with the past and called down blessings for his reign. If the drinking vessel at his inauguration was an actual skull cup, or a symbolic equivalent of one, a connection would also have been made through it with the world of the ancestors.

Conclusion

The representation of Mimir in the literature can be seen as corresponding roughly on the human level to a skull cup made from the head of a sacrificed man and used for ritual purposes, including the sealing of the agreement to end the Æsir-Vanir war. The mead contained in the skull cup or an equivalent vessel can be conceived of both generally as the giver of sovereignty with its threefold power and specifically in three separate draughts as the giver of knowledge and poetry to the scholar and poet, of prowess to the warrior and of prosperity to the farmer.

Emily Lyle ([e.lyle\[at\]ed.ac.uk](mailto:e.lyle[at]ed.ac.uk)), *Celtic and Scottish Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh, 50 George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LH, Scotland, UK.*

Notes

1. See Lyle 2019 and 2021a and the references there. The identification of gaze with a missile such as a spear or ingot is suggested by episodes in the Irish *Cath Maige Tuired* and the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* where the gaze is that of the gigantic god Balar or the giant Ysbaddaden. In the parallel episode in *Skáldskaparmál* 18, the ingot that is thrown by the giant Geirröðr and returned by Þórr can be seen as an instantiation of Geirröðr's gaze which could potentially be concretized as his eye as missile. If Óðinn were the contestant with Þórr, as he is in *Hárbarðsljóð*, this episode would give a fitting cosmic setting for the loss of his eye, which could, in a hypothetical earlier form of the story, have been hurled as missile at Þórr and thrown back by Þórr to

become a star in the same way as Þórr threw the giant Þjazi's eyes up into the sky.

2. For an alternative view, see von See et al. 2006: 575–576.
3. Dumézil's initial formulation, as noted by Margaret Clunies Ross (1994: I, 16n.4, quoted in Lyle 2012b: 7), was most unlikely to have applied to the society in the Indo-European homeland before dispersal, and his later formulation is rather nebulous. However, the functional triad that Dumézil identified can now be seen to rest securely on the concepts associated with age grades. In addition to the study Lyle 1997 which follows on from McCone 1987, see the article by Dmitri M. Bondarenko and Andrey V. Korotayev which was drawn upon by David Graeber (2017: 416–417). The Russian anthropologists say (2003: 122–123):

The sociopolitical organization of pastoral proto-Indo-Europeans appears to have been characterized by a developed age-class system. ... With the formation of stratified societies among the Indo-Europeans, the age-class stratification tended to transform into a social stratification system. Within this process, the age-class of initiated youngsters transformed into an estate/varna of warriors/political leaders (Indian *kshatryas* or, say, the noble estate of medieval western Europe). The age-class of elders transformed into an estate/varna of priests – Indian *brahmins* or the priestly estate of medieval western Europe. The age-class of mature married men transformed into an estate/varna of peasants – Indian *vayshyas* or the European third estate.

4. Littleton 1973: xiii. A sympathetic overview of Dumézil's work is available in Littleton 1982 but account should also be taken of negative responses such as can be found in Page 1978–79, Belier 1991, and Schlerath 1995–96. The notion of the three functions in isolation may now be being superseded by an awareness of their operation within the larger framework of a tenfold pantheon, as proposed in Lyle 2012a, 2021b, 2021–22, 2022.
5. The anthropologist Nicholas J. Allen, considering Dumézil's functional findings in the Indo-European materials known in history, commented (2000: 58): “The only reasonable explanation for these findings is that the speakers of proto-Indo-European, who were of course non-literate tribals, possessed a primitive classification.”

Works Cited

Sources

Atlamál in groenlenco = Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (ed.) 2014. *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Pp. 383–401.

Bellows, Henry Adams (ed. & trans.) 1923. *The Poetic Edda*. New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation.

- Bertelsen, Henrik. 1905–11. *Þiðriks saga af Bern*. 2 vols. Copenhagen: S.L. Møllers.
- Fagrskinna* = Bjarni Einarsson (ed.) 1985. *Fagrskinna: Nóregs konunga tal*. In *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum. Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*. Íslensk fornrit XXIX. Reykjavík.
- Faulkes, Anthony (ed. & trans.) 1995. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*. London: J.M. Dent.
- Finch, R.G. (ed. & trans.) 1965. *Völsunga saga / The Saga of the Volsungs*. London: Nelson.
- Finlay, Alison (ed. & trans.) 2004. *Fagrskinna, a Catalogue of the Kings of Norway: A Translation with Introduction and Notes*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Finlay, Alison, & Anthony Faulkes (ed. & trans.) 2011–16. *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*. 3 vols. 2nd ed. London: Viking Society for Northern Research.
- Foulke, William Dudley (trans.) 1907. *Paulus Diaconus, History of the Langobards (Historia Langobardorum)*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Godley, A.D. (trans.) 1921. *Herodotus. The Persian Wars. Volume II: Books 3–4*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hákonar saga góða* = Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1941–51. *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*. 3 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Vol. I, pp. 150–197.
- Hávamál* = Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (ed.) 2014. *Eddukvæði I: Góðakvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Pp. 322–355.
- Larrington, Carolyne (trans.) 2014. *The Poetic Edda*. Revised edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McTurk, Rory (ed.) 2017. “Anonymous, *Krákumál*”. In *Poetry in fornaldarsögur*. Ed. Margaret Clunies Ross. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 8. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* = Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1941–51. *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*. 3 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Vol. I, pp. 225–372.
- O'Neill, Joseph (ed.) 1905. “*Cath Boinde*”. *Ériu* 2: 173–185.
- Perrin, Bernadotte (trans.) 1914. *Plutarch. Parallel Lives*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Heineman.
- Sigrdrífumál* = Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (ed.) 2014. *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Pp. 313–321.
- Spillan, D. & Cyrus Edmonds (trans.) 1849. *Livy. History of Rome, books nine to twenty-six*. London: Henry G. Bohn.
- Völundarkviða* = Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (ed.) 2014. *Eddukvæði I: Góðakvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Pp. 428–437.
- von See, Klaus, Beatrice LaFarge, Beatrice Gerhold, Eve Picard, and Katja Schulz (ed.) 2006. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda 5: Heldenlieder – Frá dauda Símfíotla, Grípisspá, Reginsmál, Fáfnismál, Sigrdrífumál*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Worm, Ole. 1651. *Runir seu Danica Literatura Antiquissima*. [Copenhagen]: M. Martzan & G. Holst.

Ynglinga saga = Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1941–51. *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*. 3 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Vol. I, pp. 9–83.

Literature

- Allen, Nicholas J. 2000. *Categories and Classifications: Maussian Reflections on the Social*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Andrews, A. LeRoy. 1928. “Old Norse Notes 7”. *Modern Language Notes* 43(3): 166–171.
- Barnard, Alan & Anthony Good. 1984. *Research Practices in the Study of Kinship*. ASA Research Methods in Social Anthropology 2. London: Academic Press.
- Bek-Pedersen, Karen. 2011. *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press.
- Belier, Wouter W. 1991. *Decayed Gods: Origin and Development of Georges Dumézil’s ‘Idéologie Tripartite’*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Bondarenko, Dmitri M. & Andrey V. Korotayev. 2003. “‘Early State’ in Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Statistical Reanalysis of Henri J. M. Claessen’s Database”. *Cross-Cultural Research* 37(1): 105–113.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. 1994. *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*. 2 vols. Odense: Odense University Press.
- Enright, Michael J. 2013. *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Fleck, Jere. 1970. “Konr – Óttarr – Geirroðr: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship”. *Scandinavian Studies* 42: 39–49.
- Graeber, David. 2017. “Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship: or, Elements for an Archaeology of Sovereignty”. In Marshall Sahlins & David Graeber. *On Kings*. Chicago: HAU Books. Pp. 377–464.
- Helms, Mary W. 1998. *Access to Origins: Affines, Ancestors and Aristocrats*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 1986. *Myth, Cosmos and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
- Lindow, John. 2002. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lindow, John. 2021. *Old Norse Mythology*. Oxford Scholarship Online. DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190852252.001.0001.
- Littleton, C. Scott. 1973. “Introduction, Part I”. In *Georges Dumézil. The Gods of the Ancient Northmen*. Ed. and trans. Einar Haugen. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. ix–xviii.
- Littleton, C. Scott. 1982. *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Work of Georges Dumézil*. 3rd edn. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press.
- Lyle, Emily. 1997. “Age Grades, Age Classes and Alternate Succession: A Restatement of the Basis at the Societal Level of Indo-European Symbolic Partition”. *Emania* 16: 63–71.
- Lyle, Emily. 2008. “The Marriage and Recovery of the Young Goddess: Story and Structure”. *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 36(3–4): 356–370.
- Lyle, Emily. 2012a. *Ten Gods: A New Approach to Defining the Mythological Structures of the Indo-Europeans*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Lyle, Emily. 2012b. “Entering the Chimeraland of Indo-European Reconstruction”. *Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 5: 6–10.
- Lyle, Emily. 2016. “The Law of Succession Established by Eochaid Fedlech and its Implications for the Theme of the Irish Sovereignty Goddess”. *Etudes Celtiques* 42(1): 135–142.
- Lyle, Emily. 2019. “Thor’s Return of the Giant Geirrod’s Red-Hot Missile Seen in a Cosmic Context”. *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 55(1): 121–136.
- Lyle, Emily. 2021a. “Introduction”. In *Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions*. Ed. Emily Lyle. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Pp. 11–21.
- Lyle, Emily. 2021b. “The Scylding Dynasty in Saxo and *Beowulf* as Disguised Theogony”. In *Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions*. Ed. Emily Lyle. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Pp. 235–249.
- Lyle, Emily. 2021–22. “The Female Quarter”. *Nouvelle Mythologie Comparée / New Comparative Mythology* 6: 165–178. Also in: <http://nouvellemythologiecomparee.hautetfort.com/numero-6-no-6-2021/>
- Lyle, Emily. 2022. “Structures for the Transfer of Power in Ibn Fadlan’s Account of a Rus Funeral”. *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 74 (*The Wild Hunt for Numinous Knowledge*): 139–152.
- McCone, Kim. 1987. “Hund, Wolf und Krieger bei den Indogermanen”. In *Studien zum indogermanischen Wortschatz*. Ed. W. Meid. Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft 52. Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck. Pp. 101–154.
- McCone, Kim. 1990. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*. Maynooth: An Sagart.
- Mitchell, Stephen. 2017. “Othinn, Charms and Necromancy; *Havamal* 157 in its Nordic and European Contexts”. In *Old Norse Religion: Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell & Jens Peter Schjødt. Cambridge, MA: The Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University Press. Pp. 341–361.
- Page, R.I. 1978–79. “Dumézil Revisited”. *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 20(1–2), 46–69.
- Schlerath, Bernfried. 1995–1996: “Georges Dumézil und die Rekonstruktion der indogermanischen Kultur”. *Kratylos* 40: 1–48, 41: 1–67.
- Simpson, Jacqueline. 1962–65. “Mímir: Two Myths or One?”. *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 16: 41–53.
- Steinsland, Gro. 2011. “Origin Myths and Rulership from the Viking Age Ruler to the Ruler of Medieval

Historiography: Continuity, Transformations and Innovations”. In *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*. Ed. Gro Steinsland. Leiden: Brill. Pp. 15–67.

Sundqvist, Olof. 2002. *Freyr’s Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum 21. Uppsala.

Sundqvist, Olof. 2022. “The Ceremony of ‘King Taking’ at the Swedish Mora Stone: A Medieval

Invention or Traces of an Ancient Initiation Ritual?”. *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidskrift* 74 (*The Wild Hunt for Numinous Knowledge*): 89–118.

Svava Jakobsdóttir. 2002. “Gunnlöð and the Precious Mead (*Hávamál*)”. In *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*. Ed. Paul Acker & Carolyne Larrington. New York and London: Routledge. Pp. 27–57.

RMIN
