

Gunnlöð and the Precious Mead

I

The central event in my novel *Gunnlaðar saga* is the king's consecration and the ceremony associated with it, in which the goddess grants the king authority to reign with libations and 'holy embraces'.¹ This scene was the product of my research into the stanzas in *Hávamál* which are concerned with Óðinn and Gunnlöð. I tried out my interpretation on Gisli Sigurðsson while *Gunnlaðar saga* was in preparation, and it must not have seemed too wrong-headed to him since he adopts it in his edition of *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* and acknowledges me in the introduction. I thus find myself obliged to him and to readers of the edition to explain this interpretation and to provide some evidence to support my conclusion. Such an explanation may be as superfluous to the readers' understanding of the novel as *Hávamál* is to the sons of giants,² except insofar as they are interested in it. But it might be necessary, as a result of my speculations, to draw wider inferences from stanzas 104-110 of *Hávamál* than Gisli does in his edition.

Scholars and lay people alike will be most familiar with the traditional account of the mead of poetry which may be found in *Snorra Edda*: Óðinn acquires the mead by seducing Gunnlöð into making love to him. First, Óðinn disguises himself under the pseudonym Bölverkr and tricks his way to Gunnlöð, because Suttungr has denied him the mead. He has Baugr bore through the rock, and creeps into the augur-hole in the form of a snake. Then:

Fór Bölverkr þar til sem Gunnlöð var ok lá hjá henni þrjár nætur, ok þá lofði hon honum að drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki. Í inum fyrsta drykki drakk hann alt ór Óðreri, en í öðrum ór Boðn, í inum þriðja ór Són, og hafði hann þá allan mjöðinn. (ed. Faulkes 1998, 1:4)

(Bölverkr went to where Gunnlod was and lay with her for three nights and then she let him drink three draughts of the mead. In the first draught he drank everything out of Óðrerir, in the second out of Boðn, in the third out of Són, and then he had all the mead; tr. Faulkes, 63).

Óðinn assumes the form of an eagle and flies away with the poetic mead as fast as he can. Suttungr flies after him, also in an eagle's shape.

Most scholars and interpreters of *Hávamál* are confident that Snorri's account is a reasonably reliable source concerning the relations between Gunnlöð and Óðinn, and that we may therefore refer to it to explain the more obscure aspects of *Hávamál*. Thus David Evans says in his edition of *Hávamál* (80-1):

Gunnlöð is known in Norse legend only as the daughter of the giant Suttungr, who had acquired the sacred mead of poetry from the dwarfs Fjalarr and Galarr; Óðinn wins the mead by seducing her. The story is related in 104-110 below, and in Snorri's *Prose Edda* (Skáldskaparmál ch. 5-6).

The belief that sts. 104-110 tell how Óðinn acquires the mead by seducing Gunnlöð, even though there is in fact no evidence for it, is remarkably tenacious. Most scholars avail themselves of this explanation whenever the mead of poetry is mentioned, as if it were irrefutably proven, and yet neither account has been fully explained. It has virtually become customary to speak of the theft of the mead as one of Óðinn's amorous adventures.

Theories suggesting that the *Hávamál* account represents an independent version of the myth about the poetic mead seem to have reached a dead end. It is a long time since M. B. Richert put forward the view that the *Hávamál* episode describes the marriage of Gunnlöð and Óðinn (Richert, 9-20). Scholars have not generally agreed with this interpretation, and Richert did not set the 'marriage' in either a religious or a mythological context. It is clear that it is no traditional marriage. De Vries' opinion concerning the ancient appearance of these stanzas of *Hávamál* also appears to have received little or no support. He believed that the use of the *galdr* metre indicates that the poet wanted to foreground the nuances of seriousness and solemnity characteristic of religious ceremonies (de Vries 1941, 1:161).

It is clear that the *Hávamál* stanzas in question must be examined, once and for all, without the help of Snorri Sturluson. It seems to me that they will remain obscure if we turn to Snorri uncritically for explanation and read into the poem on the basis of the younger work. It may well be that many points of *Hávamál* seem obscure only because attempts are made to force them into fixed conceptions imported from other times and places—or perhaps because of simple misunderstandings.

In his book *Myth and Religion of the North*, Turville-Petre compares the plots of both *Hávamál* and Snorri's account with the intention of showing how they disagree. From such a comparison, Turville-Petre believes, we may discover something about Snorri's method and his use of sources (35-7). For me, however, it is not important to research Snorri's methodology, nor his multi-faceted story about the mead of poetry; rather, using Turville-Petre's method as a guide, I intend to direct the spotlight onto *Hávamál* in order to clear undesirable influences from Snorri away from its interpretation. If such a comparison were to bring *Hávamál* into sharper focus, it would then be possible to examine it with a more open mind and come nearer to understanding its actual core.

II

In the *Hávamál* account, it is clear that Óðinn does not break into Suttungr's realm, nor does he conceal his presence. There is nothing underhanded about this journey; quite the opposite. The text is so vibrant that one hears Óðinn's puffed-up arrogance:

lan aldna iðun ec sóttá; nú em ec apr um kominn;

fát gat ec þegiandi þar;

morgum orðum mælti ec í minni frama

(Suttungr's spelm. (st. 104))

(I visited the old giant, now I've come back, I didn't get much there from being silent; with many words I spoke to my advantage in Suttungr's hall.)³

In the next stanza, Gunnlōð is brought into the narrative, pouring out the precious mead. The first *helmingr* of the stanza is bright and clear and has a true, fixed form, reminiscent of openness and ritual rather than of secretiveness and deception. The description is uniquely pictorial in its simplicity and bears little relation to the secret assignation in a dismal mountain nook described by Snorri (st. 105): "Gunnlōð mér um gat / gulnom stóla / drycc ins dýra miðar."

I translate these lines as follows: "Gunnlōð on the golden chair gave me a drink of the precious mead." Most of the scholars and translators who have taken a stand on the matter of who sits in the golden chair seem to take the view that it is Óðinn himself. But in order to force Óðinn onto the chair it is also necessary to force the Icelandic language. It accords most naturally with a sense of the Icelandic language to see the subject (Gunnlōð) on the golden chair. Later, I will come to material points which support this reading. But if this section is read in this obvious and natural way, a picture emerges revealing Gunnlōð in a noble, even ritualistic, light.

Snorri does not mention the golden chair, nor the ring-oath sworn by Óðinn (Háv. 110): "Baugeið Óðinn / hygg ec at unnit hafi; / hvat skal hans trygðom trúá?" (I thought Óðinn had sworn a sacred ring-oath; how can his word be trusted?). This difference between the two versions is here readily apparent and requires no further discussion.

In both versions, it appears that Gunnlōð grants Óðinn a drink of the mead and sleeps with him (Háv. 108: 6 "þeir ar er lögðomc arm yfir" [who laid her arm over me]). Snorri, however, mentions three nights, and the mead is in three containers: the pot Óðrerir and the two vats Son and Boðn. Only Óðrerir is mentioned in *Hávamál*. Opinion has been somewhat divided as to whether the noun Óðrerir in Háv. 107 refers to the mead or to the vessel. Turville-Petre and Evans consider that Óðrerir is a name for the mead, while Gisli Sigurðsson reckons that it is the vessel itself, and I am in

agreement with his interpretation. The noun Óðrerir also occurs in st. 140 of *Hávamál*, where it is said that Óðinn receives a drink of the precious mead after having hung on the *vindgæmleði* (gallows) for nine nights: "oc ec drycc of gat / ins dýra miðar; / ausinn Óðrerir" (and I got a drink of the precious mead, poured from Óðrerir). Most scholars would consider it likely that Óðrerir in st. 140 refers to the vessel, so it seems reasonable to do so in st. 107, assuming in this instance an internal continuity in *Hávamál*. It is very significant, however, that *Hávamál* does not mention the eagle at all, and there is no indication that Óðinn steals the mead itself and spits it out in Ásgarðr, as it says in Snorri. No conclusion can be drawn from *Hávamál*'s account other than that Óðinn steals the vessel out of which the drink is ladled.

Turville-Petre (37) considers that the most significant difference between the two accounts consists in the fact that, in *Hávamál*, Óðinn uses Rati—whether that is an awl or something else—to get out of Suttungr's realm, whereas, in Snorri, he uses it to get in. It is clearly worth paying particular attention to this detail. Apart from anything else, it supports the view that *Hávamál*'s Óðinn does not come in secretly; he has legitimate business in the ancient giant's hall. In *Hávamál*, his journey to the hall is not thought worth describing, since it is the robbery and the escape that is the focus of the account. But then the question arises of how the word *þolverkr* in st. 109 should be understood. Is it a pseudonym, as it is in Snorri's account?

In st. 109, we are told how the frost-giants come 'the next day'—that is, the day after the 'wedding'—to ask for news: "at Þolverki þeir spurðo, / ef hann væri með þóðom kominn / eða hefði hánom Suttungr of sótt" (they asked about Þolverkr, whether he was amongst the gods, or whether Suttungr had slaughtered him.) Prior to this stanza, Óðinn had been the speaker for five stanzas, narrating the course of events from his point of view. In sts. 109 and 110, the viewpoint shifts. The poet or narrator speaks in these stanzas, and Óðinn is discussed in the third person; the stanzas represent a kind of epilogue (st. 109) and an altogether mournful appraisal of the oath-breaking (st. 110). It is not only the viewpoint which changes, but also the spirit of the poem. A second voice has taken over.

The word *þolverkr* obviously means 'he who does evil work, villain'; it is not used in *Hávamál* until the plot is complete and the evil deed is done. In the manuscript, capital letters are not used except at the beginning of stanzas. It is therefore not possible to deduce from the orthography whether *þolverkr* is to be understood as a proper noun, which has served as a pseudonym, or whether it is a name which the narrator himself chooses for Óðinn, after the evil deed has been done. By this point, both the narrator and the audience are fully aware of the robbery, and the narrator can, because of the content and the context, call the thief a villain without the need for further explanation. The poet, or narrator, is here explaining in his

Baugeið

own words that the frost-giants come to ask about the villain. It may be that this is the original occurrence of *Bólverkr*, which attached itself to Óðinn as a *heiti*, and that the theory about the pseudonym is an explanation from later times.

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 mjóðr" (the precious mead). *Hávamál*'s precious mead is able to do something other than make men into poets or scholars.

If one can only restrain oneself from turning to Snorri and reading into the *Hávamál* text, it becomes clear that the accounts have little in common. Besides the name Óðrerir, they share only two details: the fact that Gunnloð goes to bed with Óðinn, and that she gives him mead to drink. The settings, too, are different. In *Hávamál*, the action takes place on a grand, open stage: a woman on a golden chair pours out for Óðinn the precious mead, which he appears to have won by means of his preeminence as well as his subsequent sacred oaths. But in the master storyteller Snorri's account, these shared details are crammed into two sentences set almost in a vacuum, and the style is as lively as the setting; the bare details are sandwiched between vigorous and imaginative mythological narratives where magic and shape-changing are par for the course. Would Snorri have passed up such picturesque and magnificent features as a golden chair and a ring-oath if he had known about them?

But even though the gist of the story in *Hávamál* has been lost in the course of its long journey to Snorri, it is clear from these similarities between the versions that the two details (Gunnloð's sexual union with Óðinn and her giving him mead) are essential motifs which have been preserved together and must be related to each other. Unless we study them in tandem, we risk losing our way.

Our exploration of this topic leads next to the tradition of Celtic tales about ancient royal consecration ceremonies. In this series of Irish stories, we find not only a ceremony which encompasses both of the key motifs of the Gunnloð-legend—a woman (the goddess) who grants the king-figure (or hero) mead and goes to bed with him—but also a golden chair or its equivalent, the high-seat. The goddess (or her personification) is called 'Sovereignty,' and she grants the king authority to reign with a 'sacred marriage.' These Celtic legends are found throughout European medieval literature, and they become the main feature of stories about the Grail-Quest, the Waste Land and the powerful Fisher-King. The research of scholars in Celtic and Indian lore demonstrates that we are dealing with a traditional story motif which is widespread among the Indo-European peoples, and that we may trace its development through historical sources and legends back into the shadowy prehistory of the East.

golden chair
ring-oath

Óðrerir - Grail

III

The oldest Irish story of this kind must be *Baile in Scáil* (*The Phantom's Frenzy*). It concerns a legendary king called Conn Cétchathach. One day, Conn goes up onto the ramparts of the royal residence at Tara with his three druids and his court poet; it is his custom to do this every day in order to find out whether the people from the secret hills or the Fomorians⁴ are going to make a surprise attack on Ireland. That day, a heavy fog closes in suddenly. A man comes riding out of the fog and asks Conn to go home with him. He takes him to a wide plain where a golden tree is growing. There is a house thirty paces long with a ridge-beam made of white gold. They go inside and see a maiden sitting on a crystal throne, wearing a golden crown on her head. In front of her is a silver cauldron with golden horns. Beside her there is a golden tub and in front of her is a golden cup. They also see the secret king Lug in his high-seat, and the story says that people in Tara never saw so distinguished a man. He tells them that he has come from the kingdom of the dead to tell Conn how long he and his descendants after him will rule in Tara. It is clear from this that the King in Tara is the supreme king of Ireland. The story continues:

The girl was [Flaith Éirenn] the Sovereignty of Ireland, and she gave food to Conn, the rib of an ox and the rib of a hog. The oxrib was twenty-four feet long and eight feet from the arch to the ground. When she went to serve the ale, she asked to whom the cup of red ale (*derg flaith*) should be given, and the Phantom [Lug] answered her. When he had named every prince from the time of Conn onward, Cesarn wrote them down in ogam on four staves of yew (Dillon, 107-9).⁵

Then the fog lifted, and they were back home in Tara.

The Irish scholar O'Rahilly tells a version of the same tale, in which the account of the maiden's dispensing the ale is clearer and more closely recalls the description in *Háv.* 140: ("oc ec drycc of gat / ins dýra miadað, / ausinn Óðrerir" [and I got a drink of the precious mead, poured from Óðrerir]). O'Rahilly's version is as follows:

In *Baile in Scáil* we find her depicted as a lady wearing a golden crown and seated on a crystal throne, having before her a vat of red liquor, from which she pours a draught into a gold cup which she hands to each successive king of Ireland (O'Rahilly 1946b, 14).

R.S. Loomis's version of the tale of Sovereignty and Conn differs only slightly from O'Rahilly's version but is even more similar to *Háv.* 140 (Loomis, 220-22).⁶ In his version, the silver barrel full of red ale is standing next to Sovereignty, along with a golden ladle and a golden cup. As Sovereignty ladles the ale into the cup, she asks who should receive the golden ale. Finnur Jónsson (1924, 148) maintains that "ausinn Óðrerir" in *Háv.* 140 likewise means "ladled out of Óðrerir". It would of course be

necessary to compare the original terms in the Irish manuscript with those in the Icelandic text.

IV

The Irish scholar D. A. Binchy says that the ancient king of Ireland "was originally a sacred personage, tracing his descent from one or other of the ancestral deities and mystically invested with sovereignty by means of immemorial inauguration rites" (cited from Dillon and Chadwick, 93). It is necessary here to explain the notion of sacral kingship, which appears to have been customary among most ancient peoples. In some places, such as Egypt, the king was looked on as a god; in other places he was a demi-god or a descendant of the gods, a kind of mediator between the gods and men. The king's godlike character determined his role and destiny. He was held responsible, in some mysterious way, for fertility and for the well-being of his subjects and he could be deprived of his kingship, or even his life, if something went wrong. We must simplify matters here, since sacral kingship is a long and complicated business. The most important thing for our purposes is that the king was powerful because of his divinity, and his divinity was asserted in particular ceremonies. In the king's consecration, ceremonies symbolising death and rebirth and even the recreation of the world were implicit. Thus in India and the Far East, the consecration was associated with the meeting of the old and new years. The drink given to the king in these ceremonies represented nectar from another world, often the underworld. A human being was reborn as a god and a king by undergoing a symbolic death, and was often given a new name.⁷ Thus we may appreciate the importance of the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) in Irish legends. The king was able to demonstrate that he was married to the goddess (or land), and this confirmed his right to the kingdom. There is, I think, little doubt that sacral kingship was customary among the Germanic peoples, just as it was for other races. But it has been difficult to find irrefutable evidence for the consecration of kings. In Ireland, however, the legends and historical sources give clear testimony.

The customs for consecrating the king as described by the Irish scholar Binchy were implicit in the so-called *banais rígi* (the wedding-feast of kingship), which represented the king's marriage to the personification of the female deity, who is called *Sovereignty* in the English language and legends, and *flaith* in Irish. She is in fact the goddess of the land or the district over which the king ruled. The word *flaith* is a pun, and has two distinct meanings: on the one hand 'alc' or 'mead', on the other 'power' or 'authority' (Dillon, 109 ff.).

The circumstances of this *hieros gamos* were as follows: the goddess (sovereignty and the land personified) offered a consecrated victim a drink and went to bed with him. Vestiges of this ceremony are found in Irish

sources right into the fourteenth century, where it is said that Fedlimid O'Conchobhair married the region of Connacht (Dillon and Chadwick, 93).

With reference to the story of Gunnlǫð in *Hávamál*, it is interesting that O'Rahilly and Mac Cana consider both motifs, of the granting of the mead and of the embrace, to be the central focus of myths and stories about the earth-goddess. In Irish stories, varying emphasis is laid on the two motifs; sometimes one or the other is in the foreground, while in some only one of the motifs appears. The scholar Mac Cana, who has made an exhaustive study of these stories, points out that there is no reason to expect that all versions will preserve the same pattern in every small detail. He considers that the story is concerned with the *hieros gamos* if one or both elements are present in the correct context. He also points out that the word *banais* in *banais rígi* could indicate both elements (in Old Irish, the word is rendered *banfeiss*, and the word *fess* (*feis*) can mean both 'to sleep' and 'to sit feasting') (Mac Cana, 86).

The episode in *Hávamál* preserves both of these central motifs with exceptional clarity, and the statement that Gunnlǫð gave 'a drink of the precious mead' (drycc ins dýra miðar) is foregrounded. The embrace is mentioned as if it were self-evident, or well-known to the audience. But Óðinn himself is very eloquent about the effect of the goddess's 'laying an arm over him':

Ífi mér á, at ec væra enn kominn
 iorna gǫrðom ót,
 ef ec Gunnlaðar né nytac, innar góðo kono,
 þeitar er lögðomic arm yfir. (*Háv.* 108)

(I am in doubt as to whether I would have come back from the courts of the giants, if I had not made use of Gunnlǫð, that good woman, who laid her arm over me.)

Is it not reasonable to interpret this as meaning that Óðinn is thanking Gunnlǫð for her help with the robbery and escape? In religious contexts, such 'holy embraces' were associated with magical power; might not Óðinn be alluding to his magical power, which has been magnified by his having enjoyed the sexual favours of the goddess?

V

The Irish drink was both red in colour and intoxicating. That is so strong a characteristic of the drink that even in the stories where the king is given the holy drink from a spring its intoxicating effect is mentioned (O'Rahilly 1946b, 14 ff.; Rees and Rees, 75).

One of the most celebrated goddesses in this group of stories is Medb Lethderg, who derives her name from the mead and its role in the conse-

creation ceremony (Dohr, 60).⁸ In the legendary tradition, she is said to be the queen of Leinster, but there is no doubt that originally she was a goddess who granted the king authority to govern. Legend has it that Medb's power over the men of Ireland was strong because "she permitted no king to reign in Tara unless he were wedded to herself," and it is said that she was married to nine kings of Ireland in a row. The legend says that one of them, Connac, did not become king over Ireland until Medb had slept with him (O'Rahilly 1946b, 15; Rees and Rees, 75).

The influence of the mead is implicit in the goddess's name, since *Medb* means 'the intoxicating one,' or 'the one who makes a man drunk'. *Medb* is from the same root as the Welsh *meddu*, which means 'drunk' and is related to the English word *mead* (Rees and Rees, 75) as well as the Old Icelandic word *miðdur* (mead).

Nothing is said about the effect of the precious mead on Óðinn in *Hávamál* sts. 104-110, but something of it comes across in sts. 13 and 14, where he alludes to the drink he has at Gunnloð's place. It is rather far-fetched to maintain that he is referring to any drink other than the 'precious mead' in these stanzas. He describes its intoxicating effect as follows:

Óminnis hegri heitir sá er yfir þlæðrom þrumir;

hann stelnr geði guma;

þess fugls fipórom ec fiptraðr varc

i garði Gunnlaðar.

Qlr ec varð, varð ofrþlvi

at ins fróða Fjalars (sts. 13-14).

(The heron of forgetfulness hovers over the ale-drinking; he steals men's wits; with the feathers of this bird I was fettered in the court of Gunnloð. Drunk I was, I was more than drunk at wise Fjalars.)

The drink given to the Irish king was not just intoxicating, it was also red in colour, and great emphasis is laid on this fact. The drink is literally named after its colour, since *derg flaith* means 'the red ale'. In the story about Conn told above, Sovereignty asks who should receive 'the red ale'. The last name of the goddess Medb, *Lethderg*, means 'half-red' or 'red on one side' (Rees and Rees, 75). Thus the colour of the mead is implicit in her name, too.

Colour is also mentioned at the beginning of st. 107 of *Hávamál*: "Vel keyptz líar / hefi ec vel notið, / fás er fróðom vant" (The cheaply bought *lítr* I made good use of, the wise lack for little). Scholars have found it difficult to explain the word *lítr* in this context, and Evans gives a splendid list of all the theories which have been put forward over the years. None of them seems to be entirely satisfactory, however, and Evans says that it is likely that the line is so corrupt that it is not possible to restore it (121). But

g
Mead
Medb
Meddu

the Irish stories lay so much emphasis on the colour of the drink given to the king that it does not seem altogether absurd to suggest that the same considerations are at work here, and that Óðinn is using the word *lítr* to describe the mead itself, with the second *helmingr* referring to the vat from which it was poured [Óðrerir]. The drink might then be seen in its proper context when sts. 140-41 (part of the subsection called *Ránatal*) are taken into account: there, drinking the precious mead is associated with obtaining wisdom, and almost the same words ("fróðr vera" [be wise]) are used. We might recall that in the Irish saga tradition the otherworldly drink is associated with wisdom (O'Rahilly 1946a, 326-7).

It might be that in st. 141, Óðinn is explaining for us exactly what we need to know about the importance of the *hieros gamos*, although only one key detail, the ancient drink, is mentioned in the previous stanza: "þá nam ec frœvaz / oc fróðr vera" (Then I began to quicken and be wise, st. 141). In sts. 107 and 108, Óðinn might be confirming his right to the realm, as kings had to do; he has been through both parts of the ceremony properly, and has grown in wisdom and been "aukinn iarðar megni" (empowered with the strength of earth). In other words, he has slept with the goddess.⁹

In the second *helmingr* of st. 107, we learn how he used his knowledge: "þvíat Óðrerir / er nú upp kominn / á alda vés iarðar" (for Óðrerir has now come up to the rim of the shrine of men? or to Earth's shrine of Aldi? [see below]).

And now things become complicated. The last line *á alda vés iarðar* has proved difficult to explain and there have been many theories as to what it means. Some scholars have resorted to emending the text, in order to glean some meaning from it, and have substituted *iaðar* (rim) for *iarðar*. Others have claimed these words refer to *Asgarðr* or *Miðgarðr*. Evans emends to *jaðar*, but Gísli Sigurðsson remains faithful to the manuscript in his edition, and allows *iarðar* to stand. My reason for attempting to explicate this line is first and foremost because there does not as yet appear to be a satisfactory explication. Secondly, none of my assumptions about the narrative content of *Hávamál* will be negated if my explication of this line proves to be absurd. Thirdly, my attempt to explicate the line has the advantage that it does not necessitate emending the text.

Because I view sts. 104-110 in the light of religious practices, I think it is unwise to look for an explanation in mythology. *Asgarðr* and *Miðgarðr* are mythological locales, and I think that we have an obligation to interpret all things with what Snorri Sturluson calls "jarðlegr skilningr" (earthly wisdom, ed. Faulkes 1982, 4; tr. 2). The religious ceremony which is described in st. 107, the holy consecration of the king and the goddess of the land or the earth, must be taking place in the goddess's own shrine, *vé jarðar* (Earth's shrine). But what was that shrine like?

In the ancient religion of the Irish, the world to which men went after death was said to be in the hills, i.e. in the ancient grave mounds (*síd*, plu-

ral side), or somewhere out at sea. Sometimes the entrance to the other-world was a cave-mouth (Dillon and Chadwick, 150). The deities honoured by this religion are named after the goddess Dana, and are called *Tuatha de Danann* (Dana's folk or race). The story goes that Dana's folk agreed to live underground after having been driven from power in Ireland. They are the Irish equivalent of the Icelandic *huldufolk* (hidden people). Ancient grave mounds still stand, bearing witness to the religion which was associated with these 'hidden people'. These mounds are reminiscent of the *hæstestuer* in Scandinavia, where one walks or crawls into a narrow passage which opens into a vaulted stone chamber.

Belief in these goddesses is connected with the earth in the most literal terms. It is not unlikely that the religion of the ancient Scandinavians was associated with hills, or that religious ceremonies derived from belief in the earth and in re-birth took place in specially prepared hills or caves. Innumerable traditions associated with such places survive in the *forml-darsögur* and in folklore. It is clearly not sensible to lay too much emphasis on these traditions, but there is a weight of evidence to suggest that such ceremonies continued into the saga age. Men entered into foster brotherhood with one another by carving up the earth and going under an arch of raised turf where they drew their own blood and mixed it together with the soil (*Gísla saga* ch. 6, ed. Þóroldsson and Jónsson, 22-23). This is obviously a re-birth ritual where belief in the earth as mother is implicit in the actual form of the ceremony. When men entered into foster brotherhood, the earth was not merely a symbol of re-birth; it was also the ceremony's frame, the shrine itself, the actual womb of a mother.

In this connection, we recall *Landnámabók's* account of Þórðr gellir, which appears to indicate some kind of consecration ceremony: "Var (þar) þá gpr hgrg, er blót tóku til; trúðu þeir því, at þeir dæi í hólana, ok þar var þórðr gellir leiddr í, áðr hann tók mannvirðing." (ed. Benediktsson, 140) (Then a shrine was made there, where sacrifices were performed; they believed that people died and went into the mound and Þórðr gellir was taken into it, before he assumed his reputation.)

In fact, it might be said that religious rituals which took place in such an earthly location actually happened *inside* the earth, under its surface. Nothing would be more natural than to say that whoever came out from there with a vat (Óðrerir) had come up, or to the surface.

We know that ancient religious sites were often located on islands. *Njarðar vé* (Njörðr's shrine) is on the island of Njardarlag, off the west coast of Norway, and has been definitely identified as a heathen religious site (Olsen). Óðrerir came up "á alda vés iarðar" (*Háv.* 107:8). *Alda* could be the accusative of the noun *aldr*, and it seems reasonable to give this word some consideration before resorting to textual emendation. Off the west coast of Norway lies the island of Alden, which was called Aldi in ancient times and is mentioned in *Egils saga* and elsewhere (ed. Sveinsson, 164).

GRAVE
MOUND

foster
-brother

re = ey

Next to it lies another island called Araldi. Sophus Bugge suggested that *aldr* means 'high island', or an island which rises high up out of the sea. On Aldi is a mountain which sailors traditionally refer to as 'the Norwegian horse'. As the name suggests, Araldi is named for the eagle [ON *ari*, 'eagle'], and there is a peak some 200 metres high on the island. I have not been able to determine whether Aldi was in any way associated with ancient religious ceremonies; I am wary of pinning *Hávamál's* *iarðar vé* down to this particular island,¹⁰ but it may be that the word *aldr* was used generally to refer to islands with particular topographical features. *Iarðar vés aldr* would then be the island or holm where such a holy place is. When it is said that Óðrerir came up "á alda vés iarðar," it could mean that Óðrerir came up from the holy kingdom, or from the underworld up to the surface of the island (*aldr*) where Earth's shrine (*Iarðar vé*) was.

VI

In *Hávamál*, the consecration ends in tragedy. The newly consecrated king steals the sacred treasure. 'The next day' (lins hindra dags, 109:1), the frost-giants come to *Háva þell* to ask for news. If people cling to the belief that *Háva þell* is in fact Ásgarðr and that Havi (the High One) here is actually Óðinn himself, the sequence of events becomes meaningless.¹¹ But in the light of the religious customs that I have described, Havi cannot be anyone other than the being who in the strength of his religious knowledge and his power over occult forces has directed the entire course of events and has led the young king-elect (Óðinn) into the secret world. The king must both show deference to this world and take control of it. The only teacher worthy of the honorific *Hávi* in this context is the king of the other-world or the underworld, the equivalent of the Irish Lug. His deputy on earth in holy ceremonies is the wise man (*frœðimaðr*), as Snorri calls him in his *Edda*.¹² The Norse mead is thus associated with three groups of people: kings, poets and wise men. Similarly, its Indian equivalent, the *soma*, was the traditional drink of kings, poets and Brahmins, as we shall see later on. Snorri calls the mead *Suttungamjǫð*, 'the mead of Surtung'. In *Skírnismál* st. 34, the giants are called Surtung's sons (*synir suttunga*). It is therefore not unlikely that *suttungr* is not a proper noun, but an epithet referring to a job of work (like *konungr*, 'king'), and that the person it refers to here was also known as Fjalart, since he is called by that name in *Hav.* st. 14.

The king's consecration ceremony comprised other elements in addition to the *hieros gamos*, although the wedding was the seal, the confirmation and the consecration itself. This was the custom among other ancient peoples, the Irish and Eastern nations. Otto Höfler (1959) links Óðinn's self-sacrifice with the consecration of the king to holy kingship, and Jere Fleck produces evidence for the fact that knowledge of religious lore was associated with the election of kings in ancient times.

HAVI

Loddfáfnismál, *Rúnatal* and *Ljóðatal* (subsections of *Hávamál*) are all concerned with powerful knowledge and lore, and the name *Loddfáfnir* might indicate that the consecration ritual is in some way be connected with the cult of the Earth (the earth-serpent?). In a religious connection, self-sacrifice is often symbolic of death, the precursor of re-birth in the *Gunnlǫð* ceremony. These four elements are brought together in *Hávamál*. It is likely that these four elements might be usefully examined as a unified whole representing all the aspects of the royal election ceremony as practised among the Germanic peoples.

VII

One might ask whether the *Gunnlǫð* story in *Hávamál* is rooted in Norse culture or whether it might be instead a Norse imitation or adaptation of an Irish original. There is no doubt in my mind that it is part of the Norse tradition. What we know of the religious outlook and *Weltanschauung* of the ancient Germanic peoples suggests that such religious customs as those described in the poem found a place there. And it would be remarkable if, alone among the Indo-European peoples, the Germanic tribes had escaped the power of the great goddess. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article for me to do any more than to touch upon a few of the more salient points.

Earlier, I mentioned the symbolic re-birth which was part of the king's consecration. This is an appropriate place for me to say a little about the belief which lay behind it. It implies more than just the cycle of the seasons. Behind it lies a belief in the "Eternal Return," as Eliade calls it: a belief in the perpetual cycle, at the heart of which is the immortal soul and the notion of resurrection or reincarnation into the next life (Eliade 1974, 1975). Roman historians say that Celtic druids taught that the soul did not die, but lived on "in alio orbe" (in another sphere); men were reincarnated into the next life (Dillon and Chadwick, 152-3). Numerous passages in the Eddic poems and other texts bear witness to the same kind of belief among the ancient Germanic peoples. The epilogue to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II says, "Þat var trúin í fornescio, að menn væri endrborin, enn þat er nú kolluð kerlingarvillu." (There was a belief in the old religion, which we now reckon an old wives' tale, that people could be reincarnated). In this context, the word *kerlingavilla* must be associated with belief in the goddess. One may also be reminded of expressions like *óðinsakr* (the field of those who do not die) or *land lifanda manna* (the land of the living), which contain the same idea of immortality.

In *The Celtic Realms*, Dillon and Chadwick state:

The spiritual role assigned to women in this cult of rebirth is a lofty one. In this phase of Irish mythology the woman, not the man, is the

spiritual vehicle who conveys the soul of the dead to rebirth in a later generation. (153)

There is no disputing the fact that the Norse people believed in the goddess. History, literature and archeological finds give a clear testimony that this was the case (Glob 1974, 1977; Brøndsted; Tacitus, ch. 40; de Vries 1941, 2: 302-14).¹³

The Irish scholar O'Rahilly maintains that the Irish goddesses were not just goddesses of the land but were also associated with the sun, rivers and lakes. He deduced this from their names, among other things. The country itself, Eire, derives its name from the goddess who is called *Fiaith Eirene* ('the sovereignty of Ireland') in the sagas. One particular Irish goddess is called *Grian*, and O'Rahilly considers her to have been a sun-goddess, for the simple reason that her name means 'Sun'. The name of the Irish goddess *Ainne*, he says, means 'traveller of the heavens', and is associated with wheels or golden discs (O'Rahilly 1946b; 1946a, 286). *Mór* of Munster is believed to have been a goddess, since it is said that the kings of Ireland sought her or desired her; people in Munster still say when the sun shines that *Mór* is sitting in her high-seat (Mac Cana, 81, 91 ff.; Rees and Rees, 136).

According to the sources, the high-seat was the inviolable place of the goddess in the ancient royal consecration ceremonies. In the story of Conn, Sovereignty is seated on a crystal throne, and similar examples may be found in the East. In Indian collections of illustrations particularly associated with kingship, we find representations of *Lakshmi* which show her sitting among lotus flowers or on a high-backed or backless high-seat (De, 3:257). In consecration ceremonies of both ancient Egypt and the East, the throne itself is named after a goddess: in Egypt it was called *Isis*. In Sumerian texts describing the coronation in the temple of *Ishtar*, the symbols of power (the branch and the crown) are referred to as goddesses ('the goddess of the branch of power' and 'the goddess of the crown'). These symbols remain on the high-seat until the king takes them. Afterwards it is said that "she" has given him a new name (Frankfort, 245-56).

In Norse mythology, the sun and brightness are associated with feminine beings, particularly giants' daughters and valkyries, as well as with the Vanir goddess *Freyja*. One of the *Ásynjur* is called *Sól* (Sun). In the Eddic poems, *Hliðskjálf* is neither located in *Valhöll* nor is it exclusively Óðinn's seat. The Eddic poems suggest that, besides Óðinn, several other gods had a right to this throne: *Freyr* is mentioned in *Skírnismál*, and *Grimnismál* says that *Frigg* (the highest of the *Ásynjur*) sits there and sees all the worlds, just as Óðinn does. Although no definite stories about the sun-goddess are preserved in Norse mythology, traces of her are evident in folk-tales and fairy-tales. The myth of the sun swallowed by the wolf, as in *Vafþrúdnismál* st. 47 ("Eina dóttur / berr Alfróðull, / áðr hana Fenrir fari" [Elf-disc will bear a daughter, before Fenrir assails her]), lives on among us in the

SUN = LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

story of Little Red Riding Hood, to cite one example.¹⁴ Considered alongside what has been said about Gunnlǫð and the golden chair above, I think that it will hardly be gainsaid that the golden chair is in fact Gunnlǫð's throne.

Does Gunnlǫð's name suggest that she was a goddess and belonged to this literary tradition? At first glance, it might appear that (*flaith* and *lǫð* were related words, but it has not been easy to find evidence to support this. On the one hand, there is the fact that *flaith* is interpreted as *lǫð* in the name of the Irish Queen Cormlaith (meaning 'pure power'), who is called Kormlǫð in *Njáls saga*.¹⁵ The description of Kormlǫð is almost identical with the personifications of these goddesses when the saga tradition has euhemerized them and placed them in a definite historical context. It is most likely that the translator perceived the relationship between these two female characters.

In Old Norse, *lǫð* meant 'hospitality', 'a good reception' (Böðvarsson, s.v.) or 'an invitation' (Egilsson, s.v. "indbydelse"). The appropriateness of this as the final element in her name will not be denied when the splendid welcome Óðinn received at Gunnlǫð's place is kept in mind. Many scholars believe that Gunnlǫð's name indicates that she was a valkyrie or a goddess. But the precise origin of the valkyries is unknown.

"Sovereignty," as was mentioned earlier, has many meanings: she is at once a bride, the one who serves the heady drink and the drink itself (Rees and Rees, 76). Mac Cana believes that the name "Sovereignty" represents a late allegorical reading, and that the woman with the drink was initially the personification of the holy mother-goddess, Eriu. O'Rahilly advances the same theory (1946b, 14). Originally, the great mother-goddess was extremely versatile. It was her function to guard the well-being of the land and the people, although she would entrust her executive power on earth to the king. In origin, she is the great goddess of eastern mythology who rules over life, death and the fates of men; she is Inanna, the powerful goddess of light, life and war; she is Ishtar and Astarte; she is the Indian goddess Lakshmi. It was only one of her roles to sanctify the man with her embraces, and it is therefore pointless to expect her to bear a name indicating only fertility worship. The Irish Sovereignty sometimes has the same name as the country or district; sometimes, she takes her name from the mead or from her role in the consecration ceremony.

Similarly, the valkyries had several functions, and it is likely that their symbolism, characteristics and behaviour are inherited from the goddess of the king and the land, Gunnlǫð. The pattern is the same, although emphases vary. Valkyries were supernatural beings who accompanied the king and heroes as wives or lovers. It is clear from the poem *Darrabarljóð* in *Njáls saga* that valkyries were believed to govern fate, which in the ancient religion was one of the rôles of the great mother-goddess. There are also cases where valkyries, like the Irish goddesses, took their name from

FLAME

the land or the people; it is believed that Sváva in *Helgakvíða Hjörvarðssonar* is associated either with Svávaland or its inhabitants (Höfler 1952, 24).¹⁶

The women who were the spiritual channels for souls between the worlds in Norse mythology were either giantesses or valkyries. They controlled the mead which granted eternal life; the valkyries themselves were reincarnated. If we follow the clues provided by the mead, it becomes clear that it is not Gunnlǫð alone who gives an invitation to a *híers gamos*. The giant's daughter Gerðr in *Skírnismál* and Sigdrífa (the valkyrie Brynhild) both serve mead. In *Skírnismál*, 'holy embraces' are readily apparent, but in *Sigrdrífumál*, as we shall see later, they are implicit in the valkyrie's having been enchanted. It is tempting to speak of Menglǫð in *Fjölsvinnsmál* in this connection. The name *Menglǫð* might be compounded from the words *menga* ('to mix'; Old English *mengan*) and *lǫð*. The royal drink would thus be implicit in her name. Menglǫð's name has usually been taken to mean 'the one who is pleased with her necklace' [i.e. *men-glǫð*]. That she may have been, although there is no mention of her having had a necklace. On the other hand, both the patterns of mythology and the symbolism of *Fjölsvinnsmál* are analogous to other stories in this group.¹⁷

The valkyries' function is to serve the beer in Valholl, as it says in both *Grimnismál* and *Snorra Edda*. Here, we are obviously talking about the vestiges of the drink of eternal life and Gunnlǫð's role in the royal consecration. Might we not expect to find the explanation for the eternal resurrection of the chosen warriors here? What drink, we might ask, was better fitted to reinvigorate fallen heroes than the one over which these divine beings had power? On the other hand, it is a fact that the name of the Germanic goddess of the king appears to be associated with battle more often than is the case among her Irish sisters, and Germanic heroes seem to ask her for a sword more often than for a draught of the mead of eternal life. It would be hasty to dismiss her or to decide for these reasons that she and the valkyries were merely goddesses of war.

Norse kings did not only make sacrifices for prosperity and peace, but also for victory (*Heimskringla*, ed. Adalbjarnarson, 20). It is therefore clear that one of the functions of divine beings was to support the king in warfare.¹⁸ *Helgakvíða Hjörvarðssonar* says that Sváva protected Helgi in battle, and it is not unlikely that the king's goddess (the valkyrie) sometimes took her name from this role. It may be that Germanic kings believed that it was more important for governance to have a sword and victory in battle than a draught of the mead of eternal life. This much is certain: the goddess's support meant health and good fortune for the king, but her abandonment meant defeat and certain death.

Two further aspects connect the valkyries with the goddess tradition: the wall of flames which I will come to later, and their enchanted state.

viz Sváva wál > deyr fl...

VIII

A comparison of Celtic and Indian legends about the goddesses of the land demonstrates that the drink of fate is an essential motif in stories of this kind. In the Irish stories, Sovereignty sometimes takes the form of a very old and ugly hag who refuses to give the king's son or the hero permission to sip the mead unless he first kisses her or sleeps with her. If he complies, she turns into an extraordinarily beautiful maiden.

One such story is the tale of Niall and the Nine Hostages. The story says that once, when they were young, Niall and his four brothers went out hunting in the forest. They planned to cook their victim, and sent Fergus off to look for drinking water. He came to a certain brook, which was being guarded by an ugly crone with black skin. The crone refused to give Fergus water unless he kissed her. The boy refused to do so and came back without water. Each of his three brothers later went on the same errand. One of them condescended to touch her lightly with his lips. In return, she promised him that he would just barely be touched by kingship, by which she meant that two of his descendants would be kings. Then it was Niall's turn. When the same condition was put to him, he clasped the crone to himself and kissed her. In his arms, she turned into the most beautiful woman in the world. "Who are you?" the boy asked. And she answered, "King of Tara, I am Sovereignty...and your seed will rule over every clan." Then she sent him back to his brothers and forbade him to give them water until they had sworn an oath of loyalty to him (Rees and Rees, 73 ff.).

The tale of Lugaide and his brothers is similar. Daire had five sons who were all called Lugaide, and it had been prophesied that one of them would become king over Ireland. A druid told Daire that whichever of them tracked down a hind with golden fur would become king. Lugaide Laigde cornered the hind and killed it. Then there was a great blizzard and one of the brothers went off to look for shelter. He came to a house where there was a blazing fire and an abundance of food and ale, where the dishes were made of silver and the bed of white bronze, and where there was also a repellent hag. She offered the boy lodgings on the condition that he sleep with her that night. When he refused to do so, she told him that he had thereby refused "sovranty" and royal honour. One after another, each of the brothers except Lugaide Laigde then went to the house and asked the hag for shelter, but none of them was invited to stay. In the end, Lugaide Laigde went into her chamber after sharing food and drink with her. When she lay down in bed, he did what she asked, and to his astonishment he saw that her face was shining like a rising sun in May and that she smelt like a fragrant garden. Lugaide took her in his arms, and she told him: "This is a

she is
re-born
re-juvanted
re-found

good journey you've made, because I am Sovereignty, and you will get sovereignty over Ireland."¹⁹

The enchanted Sovereignty motif is both commonplace and widely known in medieval lore, and examples are also found in Icelandic literature, both ancient and modern.²⁰ Some of the valkyries, too, are enchanted and lie in an enchanted sleep. The Germanic hero does not waken them with a kiss but rather by cutting them out of their skintight coat of mail. Two motifs from this type of story are found in *Sigrdrifumál*, as was mentioned earlier: enchantment and the drinking of mead.

Mythographers stress that these stories about enchantment should not be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that the goddess is an allegorical figure. They remind us that she is the personification of the land. The magical power of the kiss which breaks the spell in stories and folktales of this kind is in essence the divine power which resides in sacred intercourse, in the release of the earth's fertility from its fetters, the invigoration of the barren land and the healing of disease. The kiss she craves is a test for the hero and he is not worthy of kingship unless he passes it. A principal feature of all these stories about Sovereignty is that she is the one who directs the course of events and decides whether the king is worthy. She takes the initiative and puts him to the test.

What we are dealing with here is the power the divine being has over the human, who must submit to the conditions imposed by the higher power without hesitation. If, on the other hand, the king were in some way unfit to rule, the fertility of the land and of every creature would suffer for it. The land would become barren and the goddess's condition would reflect that of the land, since according to religious thought, they are one and the same. In medieval stories, such as in the Grail legends, it is not merely the land that is barren; the woman (earth-goddess) who impels the knights onwards and controls the entire plot is similarly afflicted, usually becoming bald or decrepit (Loomis, 296-300; Coomeraswamy 1945, 393 ff.).

The woman has the characteristics of a powerful personage, even when she has become a historical figure in the annals, sagas and tales. But in these genres, the original religious and symbolic outlook and the characteristics of the goddess, as protector of the land and its people against the worldly king, are considered faults in a human woman. When she appears as a queen in the Irish saga tradition, she is independent and bad-tempered, she is married several times over, she is not submissive, and she is vindictive if crossed. When this saga tradition is borne in mind, some of the most formidable women in the Icelandic sagas may be seen to have inherited to a suspicious degree the characteristics of the goddess of sacral kingship. Gunnhildr, the mother of kings, is easily recognisable and also a queen; Guðrún Ósvífisdóttir (in *Laxdæla saga*) may also be mentioned in this connection; and in *Njáls saga* there are two of them (an elder one and a

MAIDEN KING !!

younger one [Hallgerðr and Bergþóra]) obliged to incite thralls instead of heroes. Had Gunnarr understood early enough that his life depended on a divine lock of his wife's hair, he would hardly have given her that slap on the cheek. And it makes matters worse that a king (chieftain) who allows his household to go without food has essentially relinquished his right to the kingdom, or 'the fair slopes' (of Iceland; *Njáls saga*, ch. 75).

IX

I do not have the leisure here to enumerate the examples of *hieros gamos* associated with the consecration of kings from India or the East in general, or to explore their relationship with the customs of the Irish. However, much has been written about these matters by other scholars who have been studying for decades the common origin of the ancient royal election ceremonies. I will pay some attention to Indian mythology, and hopefully it will then become clear that Snorri's account of the theft of the mead adheres so closely to traditional story patterns that his mention of the three nights (during which Óðinn sleeps with Gunnlōð and is granted three draughts of the mead) stands out as a problematic interpolation, a dull echo of some religious custom which may have fallen into obscurity even though both story types clearly have their origins in the same mythological context.

In the ancient Indian myths, the drink was called *soma*. The Sanskrit name for it was *madhu*, a word cognate with *mīðr* and *mead* (de Vries 1957, 1:426). *Soma* was the drink of kings, Brahmin and poets. It made men immortal, it inspired poets with the gift of poetic spirit and it endowed the Indians' warrior-king and war-god with superhuman courage. *Soma* increased the gods' divine power; it was the gods' language. It was able to perform all of these functions simultaneously because in essence it was the drink of eternal life and was poured out in ancient ceremonies and holy customs which represented re-birth. "We have drunk *soma*. We have become immortal. We have reached the light. We have found the gods," as it says in the *Rig-Veda* (O'Flaherty).

The herb which was used to make the drink, and which gave it its intoxicating power, was also called *soma*. According to the *Rig-Veda*, it grew on Mujuvat mountain. It had to be gathered by moonlight; then it was washed in water and milk. The herbs were crushed between two large stones and the liquid strained through a sieve into a cauldron before being mixed with water, milk and barley.

Soma was also the name of the god in whose honour the ancient *soma* ritual was performed. During the ceremony, the drink was brought to him as an offering. He was thus the god who was sacrificed to himself. The *soma* ritual took place over a three-day period and three different vessels were used. In the course of time, the god *soma* became identified with the

moon-god himself and ten white horses were said to drag him in a wagon across the dome of the sky.

'Holy embraces' were part of the *soma* ritual. In the ceremony, *Soma* was simultaneously the moon, the sacred herb and the juice or drink. His bride was *Surya*, the sun's daughter. *Surya*'s maidservants were two poetic metres, her bridal gown was decorated with songs, her crown and hair adornments were rhythm and metres, and heaven and earth were her dowry when she went to join her bridegroom. It is said that her bridegroom was continually new with every birth (the New Moon) and that he allotted the gods their fates; this must refer to their life-spans or to time in general. I understand that this divine wedding is still, to some extent, the model for Indian weddings (O'Flaherty, 10.85, 267).

In the *Rig-Veda*, *soma* is particularly associated with Indra, the great king and warrior. A legend survives concerning Indra's wedding to his daughter Apala. The scholar Coomeraswamy believes that this saga is part of the group of enchantment stories, analogous with the Irish stories, in which 'holy embraces' release all things from their fetters (Coomeraswamy, 391-404; O'Flaherty, 8.91). In these stories, it is Apala who has the upper hand in the relationship. She thinks to herself: "What would it be like to marry Indra? Wouldn't he increase my economic status, work for me, enrich me?" She addresses him as "You there, little hero." She brings him *soma* which she has prepared specially by chewing it, and asks him to impregnate three things: her father's head, his field and the place below her belly. Then Indra drinks the *soma* from her lips. There follows a remarkable purification ritual, and although there is no need to describe it in detail here, Coomeraswamy concludes that Apala, the daughter of the sun, appears in the likeness of a serpent and that the ritual itself represents shape-changing. Inevitably, everything blooms anew: the baldness on her father's head, the barren and unfruitful field, and the complexion of the goddess or snake shines bright as the sun.

In this myth, Indra receives the *soma* from Apala, the daughter of the sun, but he is also said to obtain it in other ways. According to the *Rig-Veda*, the gods acquired *soma* from an eagle who flew down from heaven and gave it to Indra. This account is similar to *Snorra Edda*'s story about the eagle which flew into Asgardr with the mead of poetry; scholars agree it can hardly be by chance. Both stories must derive from the Indo-European narrative tradition (O'Flaherty, 4.26-27).²¹

There is only one mention of Indra having taken the form of an eagle and fetched the mead, but Indian mythology does not present this as one of his characteristics (Doht, 80). The eagle is called Garuda (*soma*-thief); Coomeraswamy investigates the story further and it becomes clear that it was the power of the voice and poetic metre (*gayatri*, fem.) which took the form of the eagle and fetched the *soma* from heaven. This power is in fact the goddess Vac, the goddess of the voice, who gives sages, prophets and

MADHU

APALA SŌMA
AMĪTĀ ABHĪM
AGANĪTA JĪTĪR
AVĪRĀ DEVĀN

poets the gift of the spirit (Coomeraswamy 1947, 466).²² In fact, she is the abstract force of creation (called Garuda when she appears as an eagle; she is Gayatri when she reveals herself in the most splendid poetic metre). She is incarnated as a human in her association with Prjapati, and together they create the whole world and all living things. It is therefore likely that it is not entirely coincidental that the Norse god associated with poetry should be the same one who brings mead to the gods.

In a more remarkable and comprehensive article, Coomeraswamy draws attention to the fact that the Symplegades motif appeared in this group of Indian myths as frequently as in myths belonging to other peoples (Coomeraswamy 1947, 463-88; Cook, 975-1015). The Symplegades are familiar from Greek mythology and were, as it is well known, cliffs which clashed together. The doves who fetched the ambrosia from Scifa in the Other World had to fly between these cliffs on their journey, and one of them always lost its life there. The Symplegades were 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. The Greek word has become a kind of synonym for the phenomenon, but the obstacle may of course exist in various forms.

In heaven, the *soma* was well-protected. The *Mahabharata* explains that the eagle had to slip through a wheel of flame to reach the *soma*:

There before the Soma Garuda beheld a razor-edged wheel of steel, covered with sharp blades, and continually revolving, as terribly bright as the sun, an engine of unspeakably dreadful aspect, fity devised by the Gods for the cutting to pieces of Soma-thieves; the Skyfarer, seeing an opening therein, hovered, and, making a cast of his body suddenly darted through between the spokes ... [and] flew off with the Water of Life (Coomeraswamy 1947, 481).

In another version of the story, told in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the eagle has to fly between two golden, razor-sharp reeds, which clash together in the blink of an eye (Coomeraswamy 1947, 466; Fowler, 215).

Snorra Edda says, "Flytr Suttungr mjöðinn heim og hirðir þar sem heitir Hnitbjörg, setr þar til gæzlu dóttur sína Gunnlóðu" (ed. Faulkes 1998, 1:3): "Suttung took the mead home with him and put it for safe keeping in a place called Hnitbjörg, setting his daughter Gunnlod in charge of it", tr. Faulkes, 62). The mead is also called *Hnitbjargarloft* in the Icelandic sagas. *Hnit* means 'collision', and the *Hnitbjörg* are therefore the 'collision-cliffs', the cliffs which crash together. There can be no doubt that Snorri's account preserves the motif of the Symplegades, the perilous entrance to the other-world, the cliffs which clash together and require superhuman skills if the hero is to pass through them and get the treasure without being crushed.²³ It is in this that the hero's heroism resides. The *Hnitbjörg* in fact represent the space, as fine as a hair, that separates life

SYMPLEGADES

BARRIER

↳ the Bridge, razor-sharp

and death. The hero must rush in and back out again so fast that, as Coomeraswamy puts it, there is no point in even trying for someone who cannot decide whether he is "to be or not to be." It is a common feature of stories of this kind that the hero escapes so narrowly that he loses something in the process. According to the laws of myth, a hero who delays for three days and nights is doomed.

In both the *Rig-Veda* and the *Satapatha Brahmana*, we are told that Garuda did not come through this perilous journey safe and sound. There was a guardian looking after the *soma*, and he quickly shot an arrow after the eagle so that the bird lost one of its tail-feathers (O'Flaherty, 4:27, 4; Eggeing, 1:7, 1, 1). The guardian of the *soma* is said to have been a snake. The story of Garuda's escape displays noteworthy parallels with Snorri's account in which Suttungr, guardian of the mead, pursues the eagle with the result that it loses part of its booty.

In one Indian story, *soma* is associated with the giants. Somaprabha (the actual shining or brightness of *soma*), the daughter of Asura Maya (the giant who is the gods' smith), has assumed the likeness of a human woman and entertains her friend by showing him some of her father's remarkable work. She explains to his father that this handiwork is in fact associated with the mechanism of heaven and earth. She says that she has received all of this from her father, and adds: "But he alone, and no-one else, understands the wheel which guards the water of life" (Coomeraswamy 1947, 482-4). Coomeraswamy writes: "That wheel as bright as the sun which was the entrance to the world of eternal life beyond the sun is, of course, the sun itself." In other texts, the sun-wheel, which is the equivalent of the Symplegades or *Hnitbjörg*, is described as a glowing wheel (*Maitri Upanishad*, tr. Hume, VI, 24; Coomeraswamy 1947, 484). And what is the *vafrlogi*, the wheel of fire which encircles the valkyries and giants' daughters, Gerðr and Menglōð, if not a glowing wheel of fire?²⁴ The hero who succeeded in riding through the *vafrlogi* would acquire the otherworldly treasure of a bride and a drink or a supernatural sword as well as total sovereignty.

The *Upanishad Brahmana* says that nobody is able to pass through the middle of the sun except by truth (ed. Bodewitz, I.3, 5, 6; Coomeraswamy 1947, 484). On the far side of the sun lies immortality, the land of eternal life, the cup of life. Is it hard to imagine that the land beyond the sun is more beautiful than the sun itself, and that Gunnlōð might 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 *Váþuspá*.

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In conclusion, I must say a few words about the theft. Coomeraswamy points out that the strong guard was not set with the intention of ensuring that the giants or the rightful owners should have the treasure to themselves. When the matter is considered more deeply, it was the owners of the mead themselves who supported the hero and often helped him on his way. The guard had to ensure that no unworthy person had access because no mortal could ever enter the kingdom of eternal life unless he deserved immortality. And it was the trials and impediments they had endured before reaching the kingdom which showed that they were worthy of the treasure. From the giants' point of view, the removal of treasures kept in the land of the immortal is theft, but from the gods' viewpoint, it is redemption, or freedom from enchantment. The Indian myth about the theft of the soma by an eagle speaks of the soma as a prisoner who has been freed. A certain justice is implicit in the texts, according to Coomeraswamy, when they say that in the soma ritual the soma becomes what it in fact is: Soma is again sacrificed to himself. The god has come home again.

This disparity between the attitudes of the gods and giants is reflected in *Snorra Edda* and *Hávamál*. Although the description of Óðinn's struggle to acquire the mead does not make him out to be among the first rank of heroes, no attempt is made to conceal admiration for him in the account of his bringing the mead to the gods. But the attitude in *Hávamál*, st. 110, is altogether different: "Baugéið Óðinn / hygg ek at unnit hafi, / hvat skal hans trygðom trúá?" (I thought Óðinn had sworn a sacred ring-oath, how can his word be trusted?). The emphasis here is on betrayal rather than theft. The viewpoint is not that of the courageous hero who has performed some remarkable feat. An almost tragic note is struck here. Faith is shattered, and the integrity of the world of the gods is smashed. Stories about the theft of a sacred vessel from the underworld (from temples?) are well-known. The account of the theft in *Hávamál* may well be a branch of that tradition.

In short, the conclusions I have drawn from a comparison of stanzas 104-110 of *Hávamál* with *Snorra Edda's* account of the relationship between Gunnloð and Óðinn are that these stanzas of *Hávamál* describe a religious ritual analogous with those which were customary in ancient Ireland, where they were associated with "Sovereignty." These ceremonies were associated with the *hieros gamos* whereby the king was consecrated to the land and the kingdom. Snorri's account, on the other hand, derives its principal motifs from mythological stories concerned with the theft of the nectar of eternal life. *Hávamál's* 'precious mead' has to do with kings; it is a libation, the cup of life. Snorri associates the drink with poets and wise men. Snorri appears to have introduced into the myth traces of the legend about the *hieros gamos* between Gunnloð and Óðinn, but his sources

giants' point
gods' point

THEFT
from
MOUND

concerning the consecration ceremony were very limited. For these reasons, his account has been much distorted, and the meaning that has been read into it and upheld (that Gunnloð allows herself to be seduced into giving Óðinn the mead) is a misinterpretation. Myths reflect the conceptions that men from former times had about their earthly existence; they are witnesses to their beliefs and religious customs. The kernel of a myth is never a banality.

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Notes

- [Larrington 1992 includes this summary of Svava's novel (147, here slightly abridged): An Icelandic girl, Dis [her name means goddess], visiting the National Museum in Copenhagen, is drawn back into the Bronze Age through a gold cup and mirror on display. Dis becomes Gunnlöð, priestess of the old religion and consecrator of kings. Óðinn must drink mead from the sacred cup and sleep with Gunnlöð in order to gain sovereignty over his kingdom. But Gunnlöð awakes to find Óðinn and the cup gone. Óðinn's theft represents the end of the worship of the goddess—mother, earth, giver of life and death—and the beginning of Óðinn's own cult of war, power-madness and new, unnatural technologies, the Iron Age. The cup must be recovered for women if the harmful effects of Óðinn's action are ever to be nullified. Dis is arrested for attempting to steal the cup from the museum. Her mother flies to Copenhagen and Dis unfolds the story to her. Eds.]
- [Svava alludes to the final stanza of *Hávamál*, which claims that the poem is 'very useful to the sons of men, quite useless to the sons of giants' (tr. Larrington 1996). Eds.]
- [Eddic citations from Neckel & Kuhn; translations adapted from Larrington 1996. Eds.]
- [The people from the secret hills are the former gods of Ireland, the people of the Sidhe, who now live underground in fairy mounds. The Fomorians are a demonic tribe, original inhabitants of Ireland, who are enemies of both gods and humans. Eds.]
- I have relied on Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's Icelandic translation in *Löng er fôr*, 106-7, although Einar Ólafur interprets the story in a different way from that presented here. [We have substituted Dillon's English translation. Eds.]
- Loomis's source is O'Curry, 338.
- See, for example, Weisweiler, Frankfurt, Hocart, von Friesen, Höfler, Eliade 1958 (and McTurk).
- Dóttir draws attention to the fact that Gunnlöð's behaviour resembles Medb's, but she believes (as does Weisweiler, 115) that *Hávamál*'s 'precious mead' is the poetic mead, and does not pursue her researches into the Irish saga tradition concerning the land-goddesses to whom kings are consecrated.

- Cf. *Hyndluþjóð* st. 38 (*Völuspá in skamma*): "Sá var aukinn / iardar megni, / svalköldum sæ / oc sonardreyra." (He was empowered with the strength of earth, the cool waves of the sea, and sacrificial blood.)
- A legend about Gunnlöð and her husband, Earl Álfir the Old, traces their origins to Hordaland on the west coast of Norway (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, ch. 10, ed. G. Jónsson, 106).
- [That is, it does not make sense that the giants would ask Óðinn for advice about Óðinn's theft; see Evans, 123. Eds.]
- [Fialar and Galar ... mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar (ON frúðimaðr). Tr. Faulkes, 62.]
- [See also Näsström. Not all scholars agree on this point; Davidson writes "the evidence we possess ... is vague and suggestive merely" (111). Eds.]
- [We find no other references for this interpretation, but Martin (130-2) cites other instances of Scandinavian folk-lore involving the sun pursued by a wolf. Eds.]
- Private communication from Jón Gunnarsson, lektor at Háskóli Íslands (The University of Iceland).
- Although my discussion of the valkyries is perforce neither wide-ranging nor exhaustive, nor even my principal focus in this article, I cannot pass up this opportunity of mentioning Ebenbauer's *Helgisage und Helgikult*, which came into my hands after my article was in press. On the basis of his research into the Eddic Helgi poems, he comes to a similar conclusion about the valkyries' origins.
- Sveinsson, 25 repudiates earlier scholars' theories about the influence of the Grail-legends on *Fjolsvinnsmál*, mostly on the grounds that there is no Grail in the poem. If my theory about the meaning of *Menglað* is correct, the equivalent of the Grail is there. *Fjolsvinnsmál* and the Grail-legends might well have drawn on the same story tradition, although it is not necessary to talk about actual influence. See "Grail, The Holy" in Hastings, 6: 385-89; also Weston, Loomis and Patch.
- Evidence for the fact that the goddess is sacrificed to for victory is presented in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, where we are told that Earl Hákon Sigurðsson sacrificed to Þorgerðr Holga-brúðr in order to ensure success in the fight against the Jomsvíkingar. See ed. F. Jónsson 1932, 61-62.
- This saga is preserved in an Irish manuscript dating from the fourteenth century. My account of it is based on that in Krappe, 445. Krappe gives examples of ancient Persian analogues to the Sovereignty legends.
- Sveinsson, 158 ff. gives several examples of the enchantment motif, both Icelandic and foreign.
- According to Turville-Petre (291), it was Olrik (236 ff.) who first pointed out the similarity between the Indian eagle and the one in *Snorra Edda*.
- The story of Gayatri as "soma-thief" is recounted in Eggeling, 3:6.2.8.9.
- In 1925, Olrik put forward the theory that the *Hnitbjörg* were in fact the same phenomenon as the Symplegades, and several other scholars (Krappe and de Vries, for example) have adopted it. In both literature and mythology, Symplegades has been translated into Icelandic as *skellbjörg* or *skellidrangar*. It might have been nicer and more natural to have used the beautiful word *hnitbjörg*.
- On the *vaftragi*, see Dronke, 263-66.