



## Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology

by William P. Reaves © 2010

### **Frigg, Baldur's Mother**

The Baldur myth is best known from Snorri's *Edda*, written in 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and based on poetic sources composed up to 300 years earlier. There Baldur is the most beloved of gods. Two Eddaic poems, *Baldur's Draumar* and *Völuspá* provide us with details of this myth. Plagued by bad dreams and fated to die, Baldur's mother Frigg requests oaths of all earthly things to do her son no harm. She passes over mistletoe as she considers it too young to take the oath. Loki learns this, makes a missile from the tender twig and places it in the hands of the blind god, Baldur's brother, Hödur. During a contest, in which all the gods throw and shot at the invulnerable Baldur, the mistletoe arrow cast by his blameless brother delivers a fatal blow. Baldur dies and Frigg dispatches the god Hermod to Hel to plead for his release from the kingdom of death. Despite this, her efforts fail.

That the Baldur myth was known as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century is evident by a detailed reference to it in the Old English poem *Beowulf* (ll. 2430-2459). Scholars have long recognized this passage as an analog to the Baldur myth.<sup>1</sup> In its tale of two princes, sons of a Geatish king, one brother accidentally kills the other with a misguided arrow. Their names, Herebæld and Hæðcyn, contain the primary elements —*bæld* and *Hæð*— of the names of Odin's sons, Baldur and Hödur.

*Wæs þam yldestan ungedefelice*  
*mæges dædum morþorbed stred,*

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* (1994), p. 271; John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods* (1997), p. 141.

*syððan hyne Hæðcyn of hornbogan,  
his freawine, flane geswencte,  
miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscet,  
broðor oðerne blodigan gare.*

For the oldest brother [Herebæld] a deathbed was strewn,  
Undeservedly, by his own kinsman's error;  
Hæthcyn shot him, his brother, his leader,  
With an arrow from his bow, curved and horn-tipped;  
Missed his mark and struck his brother,  
One son's blood on the other's shaft.<sup>2</sup>

*...Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle  
to gebidanne, þæt his byre ride  
giong on galgan, þonne he gyd wrece,  
sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað  
hrefne to hroðre, ond he him helpe ne mæg,  
eald ond infrod, ænige gefremman.*

...So it is bitter for an old man,  
To have seen his son go riding high,  
Young on the gallows; then may he tell  
A true sorrow-song, when his son swings,  
A joy to the raven, and old and wise  
And sad, he cannot help him at all.

*Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure  
winsele westne, windge reste  
reote berofene. Ridend swefað,  
hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,  
gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu wæron.*

...Miserable he looks on his son's dwelling,  
Deserted wine-hall, wind-swept bedding,  
Emptied of joy. Then rider sleeps,  
Warrior in the grave; no harp music,  
No games in the courtyard as before.

*... Swa Wedra helm  
æfter Herebealde heortan sorge  
weallende wæg.*

...Thus the Weder-king carried in his heart overflowing grief  
For Herebæld; he could not ever settle the feud against the slayer.

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<sup>2</sup> Howell D. Chickering, Jr. tr.

Told at greater length than provided here, the core elements of the myth are all present.<sup>3</sup> Through no fault of his own, the blameless brother of Herebæld mortally wounds his brother with a projectile. Like Baldur, Herebæld's status as a rider is emphasized and the poet speaks of games played in the courtyard of Herebæld's hall, a prominent feature in the Baldur myth retold in *Gylfaginning*. The *Beowulf* poet compares their father's sorrow to that of a man who lives to see his son hanged, becoming food for ravens. In Norse sources, Odin, of course, is the hanged god and the god of ravens. Notably, even Heremod (the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Norse Hermodr) turns up in the poem. From the viewpoint of the Icelandic evidence, what is perhaps most striking is that Heremod is directly compared to the hero Sigemund, just as Hermodr appears with Sigmundr in *Hyndluljóð* 2,<sup>4</sup> once again demonstrating the continuity of ideas across vast spans of time and space. The presence of the essential mythic elements in *Beowulf* inspired scholar Ursula Dronke to ask rhetorically: "if the Christian poet intended to euhemerize the myth of Baldr's death, could he have done it more effectively?"<sup>5</sup> In further support of early Anglo-Saxon knowledge of Baldur, we also find the name Beldeg or Beldæg as a son of Woden or Uoden in Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we find evidence in England as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century for Frigg's most famous role, that of mourning mother in the wake of her beloved son, Baldur's, death.

As in the *Second Merseberg Charm*, Baldur's role as a rider is also emphasized in Saxo's *Danish History* and in the Eddaic poem *Lokasenna*. In the latter, Frigg says to Loki:

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* (1994), p. 272

<sup>4</sup> John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods* (1997), p. 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> *Beowulf and Ragnarok*, pp. 322-23 in Dronke's *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands* (1996).

<sup>6</sup> North, *ibid*, p. 43.

"Veiztu, ef ek inni ættak  
Ægis höllum i  
Baldri líkan bur,  
út þú né kvæmir  
frá ása sonum,  
ok væri þá at þér vreiðum vegit."

27. "Know that if I had,  
at Ægir's halls,  
a son like Baldur,  
you would not go out from  
the Æsir's sons: you would have  
been fiercely assailed."

To which Loki retorts:

"Enn vill þú, Frigg,  
at ek fleiri telja  
mína meinstafi:  
ek því réð,  
er þú ríða sér-at  
síðan Baldr at sölum."

28. "Do you, Frigg,  
want me to recount  
more of my mischief?  
I am the cause  
that you do not see  
Baldur riding to the halls."

In the *Second Merseburg Charm*, it is *balderes* horse that is injured when Odin and Phol ride into the wood. According to Saxo, Baldur himself, before his death, was lamed and conveyed about in a carriage. In the same narrative, Baldur is said to open a freshwater well for his men. In Book 3 of the *Gesta Dancorum*, Saxo writes:

"The conquering Balder, in order to slake his soldiers, who were parched with thirst, with the blessing of a timely draught, pierced the earth deep and disclosed a fresh spring. The thirsty ranks made with gaping lips for the water that gushed forth everywhere. The traces of these springs, eternised by the name, are thought not quite to have dried up yet, though they have ceased to well so freely as of old. Balder was continually harassed by night phantoms feigning the likeness of Nanna, and fell into such ill health that *he could not so much as walk*, and began the habit of going his journeys in a two horse car or a four-wheeled carriage."<sup>7</sup>

This passage may aid our understanding of the name Phol. Saxo informs us that Baldur had the power to open springs, which were called by his name. Benjamin Thorpe states that "on the right hand side of the road leading from Copenhagen to Roeskilde there is a well called Baldur's Brönd. ...The tradition among the country people is that it was produced by a stroke of the hoof of Baldur's horse."<sup>8</sup> We frequently find references to "Phol's"— or "Fal's spring." In the province of Thuringia, a *Pholesbrunnen* is reported. Not far from the Saale river lies a village named *Phulsborn*. In the Franconian Steigerwald, we find a *Falsbrunn*. Similarly we find a *Baldersbrunno* in the Eifel mountains and in the Rhine Palatinate, the very region we discover widespread legends of Frau Holle, Frau Percht, and Frau Godan, who is the wife of Godan or Wodan (Odin).<sup>9</sup> Of the original name of the German village Pfalsau, recorded between 774 and 778 as *Pholesauwa* or *Pholesouwa*, Jacob Grimm writes:

"Its composition with *auē* (*auwa*), quite fits in with the supposition of an old heathen worship. The gods were worshipped not only on mountains, but on 'eas' enclosed by brooks and

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Elton translation.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Thorpe, *Northern Mythology* (1878, reprinted by the Folklore Society 2001) p. 26 citing P.E. Müller's edition of Saxo and Just Mathias Thiele's *Danmarks folkesagn*, as his source.

<sup>9</sup> See the first part of this article.

rivers, where fertile meadows yielded pasture, and forests shade. Such was the *castum nemus* (sacred grove) of Nerthus in an *insula Oceani*.”

Evidence of such enclosed sanctuaries is found in several Old Norse sources as *Oðinsey*, *Thorsey*, *Hlessey*, etc. *Pholesouwa* is an Old High German equivalent of names of this type, which means Phol’s sanctuary.<sup>10</sup> Thus Phol or Fal is best interpreted as the name of a god. In early Christian times, partial to euhemerism, Baldur was sometimes transformed into a king in Vestphal. According to the *Prologue to Gylfaginning*, “Odin’s second son was called Beldegg, whom we call Baldr; he had the country that is now called Westphalia.”<sup>11</sup> According to ancient belief, nearly all countries and people took their names from some ancient ruler: The Franks from Francio, the Angles from Angul, Denmark from Dan, etc. The names Phalen, and Vestphal or Westphalia can be logically explained in the same manner if Baldur was also known as Phol or Fal, and his name was said to have given rise to these districts.

Knowledge of Baldur was widespread. Over the whole of the Germanic world, certain flowers were named after him. The flower-name *Baldrsbrá*, “Baldur’s eyebrow” for the Scentless Mayweed (*Matricaria perforata*) and the Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*) still occurs in southern Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, the Faeroes, and northern England (*Baldeyebrow*). In certain parts of Germany, Lily-of-the-valley is called *weisser Baldrian*. In upper Austria, it is called *Faltrian*; in districts of Salzburg, *Villumfalum*; and in Tyrol, *Fildron* or *Faldron*. By the same token, the temporal terms *Pholtag*, *Pulletag*, [Phol’s day], which falls on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, and *Pholmânôt* [Phol’s month], which ends on the autumn-equinox may also be relevant here, as Baldur is typically interpreted as a god of light and summer.

As far as Jacob Grimm could determine, the name Phol was used chiefly by the Thuringians and the Bavarians, although they knew the same god by the names Palter or Baldur. Among the Saxons and Westphalians the names Baldag and Bældæg prevailed.<sup>12</sup> If Phol can be identified with Baldur in the *Second Merseburg Charm*, as the foregoing evidence suggests, then we have a natural explanation of its contents. The events may be seen as a presage of Baldur’s own death.

One day, Phol (Baldur) and his father are out riding with members of their family. The foot of Baldur’s horse is sprained, and each family member comes to his aid in order of their proximity. Closest is a female rider named Sinhtgunt, probably representing his wife Nanna, and her sister Sunna. Thereafter comes Frigg, his mother, and her sister, Volla, known as Fulla in the Icelandic sources. Last comes Odin, Baldur’s father, whose charm cures the sprain. Thus Baldur appears to be called by two names, *Phol* and *Baldere*, in a single verse— a not uncommon occurrence in Germanic verse, as we saw in the case of Hlin and Frigg in *Völuspá* 53 above.

That Phol is Baldur finds confirmation in similar charms of the same type. Axel Kock<sup>13</sup> speaks of a Swedish charm against sprains collected from *Sörbygdens dombok* (The Court Record of Sörbygden) 1672, which reads:

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<sup>10</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p.225.

<sup>11</sup> A. Faulkes’ tr.

<sup>12</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> *Svenska Landsmålen* 5/1887, citing Carl Ohlson Arcadius, *Om Bohusläns införlivande med Sverige*, University of Lund dissertation, pg. 118, (1883).

‘Vår herre Jesus Kristus och S. Peder de gingo eller rede öfver Brattebro. S. Peders häst fick vre eller skre. Vår herre steg af sin häst med, signa S. Peders häst vre eller skre: blod vid blod, led vid led. Så fick S. Peders häst bot i 3 name o.s.v.’

[‘Our Lord Jesus Christ and Saint Peter walked or rode over Brattebro. St. Peter’s horse got a twist or sprain. Our Lord dismounted, blessed St. Peter’s horse’s twist or sprain: blood to blood, joint to joint. So St. Peter’s horse was cured in 3 names, etc.’]

Wodan and Phol, the traveling companions in the *Second Merseburg Charm*, are equivalent to Christ and St. Peter in the charm from Sörbygdén. Whoever Phol was, Odin must have been the more prestigious of the two, as Christ was more prestigious than St. Peter. Wodan is the healer of the horse in the Merseburg Charm, while Christ is in the Sörbygdén Charm. A similar agreement exists between Odin and Christ in other medieval formulas against sprains. In a charm from Småland, Odin, out riding alone, heals his horse, and, in a charm recorded in *Kungelf’s dombok* (1629) Christ, riding alone in the same manner, is said to cure his. Besides the motif of an injured horse ridden by a divine figure, these charms all contain the similar formula: joint with joint, blood with blood, sinew with sinew, bone with bone, demonstrating their origin in a common tradition. Jacob Grimm records Danish and Scottish variants of these charms.<sup>14</sup> He provides an additional charm in Latin, which also points to Phol’s identity with Baldur. In it, three persons ride together: St. Peter, St. Michael and St. Stephanus. When Stephanus’ horse is injured, the archangel Michael is called upon to heal it.<sup>15</sup> The war-god Odin’s place is occupied by the warrior angel St. Michael, while Phol-Baldere’s place is occupied by Stephanus.

The legend of Stephanus (St. Stephen) as told in the Bollandist work *Acta Sanctorum*, contains features which indicate that elements of the Baldur myth were incorporated into it after the Christian conversion of the Germanic tribes. Baldur’s story, particularly suited to that of Stephen the first martyr, most likely invited the assimilation. The *New Testament* (*Acts 7:59*) says that Stephen was stoned by a crowd. When Baldur dies, he stands within a circle of men who “shoot and cast stones at him.”<sup>16</sup> *Gylfaginning* informs us that Baldur’s death caused the world great sorrow, while *Acta Sanctorum* says of a *beatus Stephanus*, an abbot in a Frankish Monastery, that

“when he died, a grief arose in which the heavens and the entire earth took part. All activity ceased; no one was in a condition to do anything. Rumbles and whimpers were heard among the constellations. Multitudes of lamentation streamed together. It was as if the whole world emitted a moaning cry.”

This universal grief has its parallel in what is said of Baldur’s death. The Aesir are paralyzed. They do not speak or move but simply burst into tears. They share their grief with the entire world. Everything cries: *menninir ok kykvendin ok jörðin ok steinarir ok tré ok allr málmr* [“people and animals and earth and stones and trees and all metals”]. Their tears are said to flow like water from the melting of frozen things in the spring. Baldur’s death was foreboded by bad dreams that disturbed his sleep, causing those

<sup>14</sup> Grimm, *ibid*, ch 33; and 38, citing Chamber’s *Fireside Stories*, 1842, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Petrus, Michael et Stephanus ambulabant per viam. Sic dixit Michahel: Stephani equus infusus, signet illum Deus, signet illum Christus, et herbam comedat et aquam bibat.*

<sup>16</sup> *Gylfaginning* 49.

around him great anxiety. Saxo says that Persepina, the queen of the underworld revealed herself to him in his sleep and that he was troubled at night by phantoms (Book 3). Of *beatus Stephanus*, it is said that before his death he was afflicted by fiends with such persistence that he could not enjoy even one night's rest. The monks, awakened by his cries, held all-night vigils, saying prayers over him. Baldur's dreams moved Frigg to request that all nature take oaths not harm her son. Because of her actions, he was impervious to weapons. Saxo says that iron could not pierce Baldur's "sacred bodily strength," but this invulnerability must have failed, since Hotherus was able to inflict a wound in Baldur's side that killed him. Similarly *beatus Stephanus* wore a heavy mail-coat, which finally fell asunder by supernatural intercession.

Additional clues aid the identification of St. Stephen and Phol. A saint after his death typically becomes the healer of the sicknesses that he himself suffered. Saint Stephen cures leg pain and diseases of the foot. The feast day of St. Stephen, like Phol's Day, falls at the beginning of May. A Swedish folk-ballad concerning St. Steffan has him lead five horses of different colors to water.<sup>17</sup> In the *Second Merseburg Charm*, Phol is accompanied by five riders, Odin and two pairs of sisters. Variants of the ballad, describing St. Steffan as a rider, who "*leder de Foler i Vand alt ved den ljuse Stærne*" ("led the foals to water, all by the bright star"), are recorded in Denmark. In Helsingland, a story is related that "he made his journey following the sun's path."<sup>18</sup> Like the Latin charms mentioned above, the *Ballad of Steffan* makes St. Stephen a rider without having the slightest basis in *Acts* or the Catholic tradition of the first martyr. This is easily explained if we recognize a Germanic god masquerading as a Christian saint.

The legend of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was particularly popular in Scandinavia, where Steffan was associated with costumed Christmas traditions. Like Baldur, he is associated with death and resurrection.<sup>19</sup> In a sixteenth century translation of a Norwegian poem dealing with the Nativity, 'Stephanus' allows himself to be hacked into three pieces before returning to life, an image that contradicts the traditional account of the saint's martyrdom by stoning.<sup>20</sup> Staffan or Helm-staffan is one of the traditional figures who accompanies the Julebokk from house to house during Yuletide processions. Two versions of Norwegian folk-plays involving the Three Kings and Staffan contain directions stating that "the skin-clad figure lies down" and "the skin-clad figure gets up," referring to the Julebokk. In the second play, Staffan himself boasts how he had been out in the snow and fought with the "great jul-bok." In an 1860 performance from Bohuslän, the goat is systematically covered after its death by a series of colored cloaks, before returning to life.

That the Baldur myth was an important episode in Old Norse mythology is evident from its central place in the Codex Regius manuscript of *Völuspá*, which says:

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<sup>17</sup> R. Bergström's and L. Höijer's edition of Geijer's and Afzelius' "*Svenska folkvisor*"

<sup>18</sup> Bergström and Höijer II, p. 354.

<sup>19</sup> Gunnell, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, p. 119.

*Ek sá Baldri,  
blóðgom tívur,  
Óðins barni,  
ørlög fólgin:  
stóð um vaxinn  
völlum hærrí  
mjór ok mjök fagr  
mistilteinn.*

*Varð af þeim meiði,  
er mæc sýndisk,  
harmflaug hættlig:  
Höðr nam skjóta.  
Baldrs bróðir var  
of borinn snemma,  
sá nam, Óðins sonr,  
einnættir vega.*

*Þó hann æva hendr  
né höfuð kembði,  
áðr á bál um bar  
Baldrs andskota.  
En Frigg um grét  
í Fensölum  
vá Valhallar -  
vituð ér enn, eða hvat ?*

I saw Baldur,  
the bloody god,  
Odin's child,  
his fate hidden.  
There stood grown,  
higher than the plain,  
slender and very fair,  
the mistletoe.

From that plant,  
which seemed so lovely  
came a deadly, harmful dart,  
which Hödr shot;  
Baldr's brother (Vali) was  
born quickly;  
Odin's son began to fight  
one night old.

He did not wash his hands  
nor comb his hair,  
Until to the funeral pyre  
he brought Baldr's adversary;  
And Frigg wept  
in Fensalir.  
For Valhall's woe.  
Understand ye yet, or what?

The poem *Baldrs Draumar* provides additional details. In it, Odin travels to Hel to consult a völva about the cause of Baldur's foreboding dreams. As their conversation unfolds, Odin learns the essential cause and effects of Baldur's death. In the oldest vellum manuscript of the poem (AM no. 748), most often used in modern translations, Frigg is not mentioned. However, paper copies of the poem dating from the 17th century, provide a fuller version of the poem. This version is known as *Vegtamskviða*, and contains additional lines and verses, which may have originated in a manuscript copy of the poem. In 1728, fire destroyed a large number of Icelandic manuscripts collected by the great Arne Magnússon in Copenhagen. Of the English Eddic translations, only that of Benjamin Thorpe (1866) contains the full text of the poem. It begins:

*Senn váru æsir  
allir á þingi  
ok ásynjur  
allar á máli,  
ok um þat réðu  
ríkir tívar,  
hví væri Baldri  
ballir draumar.*

1. Together were the Æsir  
all in council,  
and the Asynjur  
all in conference,  
and they consulted,  
the mighty gods,  
why Baldr had  
oppressive dreams.



*Mjök var hapti  
höfuðr blundr  
heillir í svefni  
horfnar sýndust;  
spurðu jólnar  
spar framvísar,  
ef þat myndi  
angrs vita.*

2. To that god his slumber  
was most afflicting;  
his auspicious dreams  
seemed departed.  
They the Jötuns questioned,  
wise seers of the future,  
whether this might not  
forebode calamity?

*Fréttir sögðu,  
at feigr væri  
Ullar sefi  
einna þekkastr;  
fékk þat angrs  
Frigg ok Sváfni,  
rögnum öðrum:  
ráð sér festu.*

*Út skyldi senda  
allar vættir  
griða at beiða,  
granda ei Baldri;  
vann alls konar  
eið at vægja,  
Frigg tók allar  
festar ok særi.*

3. The responses said  
that to death destined was  
Ullr's kinsman,  
of all the dearest:  
that caused grief  
to Frigg and Svafnir (Odin),  
and to the other powers  
On a course they resolved:

4. That they would send  
to every being,  
assurance to solicit,  
Baldur not to harm.  
All species swore  
oaths to spare him;  
Frigg received all  
their vows and compacts.

Frigg soliciting oaths from all things is consistent with her role as Mother Earth. In *Gylfaginning* 49-50, Snorri tells the most complete version of the Baldur story. It begins in *media res*, first we find Frigg requesting all earthly things to do her son Baldur no harm. Oaths are obtained from plants, rocks, animals, etc. Alone Frigg forgets the most fragile of flora, the waxy mistletoe, which doesn't take root earth, but hangs on trees as a parasite. This naturally explains how, despite all species swearing oaths, that mistletoe could still be used to slay him:

“The beginning of the story is this, that Baldr the Good dreamed great and perilous dreams touching his life. When he told these dreams to the Æsir, then they took counsel together: and this was their decision: to ask safety for Baldr from all kinds of dangers. And Frigg took oaths to this purport, that fire and water should spare Baldr, likewise iron and metal of all kinds, stones, earth, trees, sicknesses, beasts, birds, venom, serpents. And when that was done and made known, then it was a diversion of Baldr's and the Æsir, that he should stand up in the Thing ("the legislative assembly of Iceland; an assembly of men") and all the others should some shoot at him, some hew at him, some beat him with stones; but whatsoever was done hurt him not at all, and that seemed to them all a very worshipful thing.”<sup>21</sup>

Already in the *Germania* 43, Tacitus speaks of a pair of young men and brothers whom he calls the Alcis, worshipped together in a grove. He likens them to Castor and Pollux, twin sons of the sky-father Zeus in Greco-Roman mythology. As in the Germanic myth, one brother is dispatched to the underworld, because of the other.

Because all things had sworn not to harm him, Baldur in effect was invulnerable. The gods made a sport of this circumstance. This sport, in which a circle of men shoot weapons at a youth or youths inside the circle, finds analogs in the Germanic tradition. Tacitus speaks of such a game:

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Broedur tr. and hereafter

“They have only one kind of public show and it is the same at every gathering; naked youths whose sport this is to fling themselves about in a dance between swords and spears leveled at them. Training produces skill, and skill grace, but they do it not for gain or any payment. However daring their abandon, their sole reward is the spectators’ pleasure.”<sup>22</sup>

Olaus Magnus (Book 15, ch. 23-25) describes sword and hoop dances taking place in Sweden as late as the 16th century. Other reports of Scandinavian sword dances occur in Börgo, Finland; Copenhagen (1554) and Aalborg (1431), where the dance was already regarded as an old custom.<sup>23</sup> These sword dances may be related to circle dances, such as the masked Gothikon, war-dances accompanied by lutes, performed by Varangians in Constantinople on the ninth day of Christmas, most likely intended to symbolize the seasonal drama as a cycle of death and rebirth,<sup>24</sup> the same elements present in the Baldur myth.

Vexed at the success of the game, Loki, disguised as an old woman, goes to Frigg and asks her how this is possible. She tells him that “neither weapons nor trees” can hurt Baldur for she has taken oaths of them all. When the old woman inquires whether all things have taken the oath to spare Baldur, Frigg replies: “A sprout alone grows west of Valhall: it is called Mistletoe; I thought it too young to ask the oath of.” At once Loki left, found Mistletoe and pulled it up. He somehow turned it into a weapon and returned to the court of the gods. Snorri continues:

“Hödr stood outside the ring of men, because he was blind. Then spake Loki to him: ‘Why dost thou not shoot at Baldr?’ He answered: ‘Because I see not where Baldr is; and for this also, that I am weaponless.’ Then said Loki: ‘Do thou also after the manner of other men, and show Baldr honor as the other men do. I will direct thee where he stands; shoot at him with this wand.’ Hödr took Mistletoe and shot at Balder, being guided by Loki: the shaft flew through Baldr, and he fell dead to the earth; and that was the greatest mischance that has ever befallen among gods and men.”

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<sup>22</sup> *Germania* 24, A. R. Birley tr.

<sup>23</sup> Gunnell, *ibid*, p. 131-132, citing Alford, *Sword Dance*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>24</sup> Gunnell, *ibid*, p. 131, cp. 71



This tragedy does not deter Frigg. Again she intervenes on her son's behalf, asking who will ride to Hel to plead for the release of her son. Hermod volunteers for the task and is dispatched on Odin's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir.

Snorri describes Baldur's funeral, in great detail. The descriptions of the mourners most likely have their origin in Ulf Uggasson's poem *Húsdrapa*, which Snorri also appears to have used as his source for this myth. If one compares Snorri's account of Baldur's funeral with the few surviving verses of the poem preserved by him in *Skáldskaparmál*, a one-to-one correspondence emerges. The vivid visual quality of Snorri's narrative most likely is rooted in the poem *Húsdrapa* which was composed to commemorate carvings on a hall at Hjarðarholt, according to *Laxadaela Saga*, ch 29. Eddaic poems such as *Skírnismál* and *Baldur's Draumar* confirm individual details of the account such as the burning of the ring *Draupnir* on Baldur's breast, mentioned in *Skírnismál* 21:

*Baug ek þér þá gef  
þann er brendr var  
með ungom Óðins syni  
Átta ero jafnhögir,  
Er af drjúpa  
Ena níundo hverja nótt*

The ring, I give you then  
that was burnt  
with Odin's young son.  
Eight more, just as heavy,  
drop from it,  
every ninth night.



When Hermod arrives in Hel riding Odin's eight-legged horse, he must employ Sleipnir to leap the high wall. *Baldur's Draumar* calls this place *heljar rann*, "Hel's high hall." Hermod ultimately meets Baldr, and passes the night with him and his wife there.

"At morn Hermódr prayed Hel that Baldr might ride home with him, and told her how great weeping was among the Æsir. But Hel said that in this wise it should be put to the test, whether Baldr were so all-beloved as had been said: 'If all things in the world, quick and dead, weep for him, then he shall go back to the Æsir; but he shall remain with Hel if any gainsay it or will not weep.' Then Hermódr arose; but Baldr led him out of the hall, and took the ring Draupnir and sent it to Odin for a remembrance. And Nanna sent Frigg a linen smock and yet more gifts, and to Fulla a golden finger-ring."

"Then Hermódr rode his way back, and came into Ásgard, and told all those tidings which he had seen and heard. Thereupon the Æsir sent over all the world messengers to pray that Baldr be wept out of Hel; and all men did this, and quick things, and the earth, and stones, and trees, and all metals,--even as thou must have seen that these things weep when they come out of frost and into the heat."

At this point in the narrative, Frigg's role as the earth-goddess is evident. Not once, but twice, she requests all earthly things do her bidding. She sends messengers out over all the world demanding oaths of them, first to do her son no harm, then to ask all things to weep for his return, as they would weep "when they come out of frost into heat," during the spring thaw. Like the vegetation that blooms in spring, from the underworld, Baldr's wife Nanna sends a linen garment back with Hermod to beautify

Frigg and a finger ring for her handmaiden Fulla. Both gifts carry weight as symbols, as John Lindow explains:

“The proffered gifts are not random. First Baldr conveys Draupnir on Hermóðr, for transport to Odin. Thus the ring makes the full journey that Baldr will not make; it is burned on the funeral pyre and then returned to the world of the living. Baldr sends it to Odin as a reminder, and as such it must become part of the arsenal of weapons Odin can employ against the jötnur, another mystery, like that of Mimir’s pickled head, that shares attributes of the living and the dead, Nanna sends *ripti* (“cloth”, “material”, probably linen [Kuhn 1968: 168, s.v.] ) or a *faldr* (“head covering”), depending on which manuscript one follows, to Frigg, and to Fulla she sends a finger ring. The gift to Frigg joins giver and receiver in traditional roles as wife and mother through the term *ripti*.<sup>25</sup>

According to Lindow, *ripti* is a rare word mostly limited to Eddaic poetry. In the poem *Rígsþula*, when Amma swaddles the newborn Karl, she does so in *ripti* (v. 21). When Karl marries, *ripti* refers to the bridal veil of Snør, his wife (v. 23). When Heimdall as Rig enters the home of Fadir and Modir who will bring the first king into the world, he finds Modir ironing *ripti*, a task appropriate to her status. Lindow continues:

“Most poignantly, *ripti* refers to the covers of the marriage bed of Sigurðr and Guðrún, which the poet of *Siguðarkviða in skamma* has Sigurðr wrap around Guðrún while the sexually frustrated Brynhildr, outside in snow and ice, imagines the scene (stanza 8). The other word for Nanna’s gift to Frigg, *faldr* (“head covering”) found only in the *Codex Upsaliensis*, appears in *Rígsþula* 29 in the first line following the stanza about Móðir’s ironing the *ripti*. It is the object of the rare word *keisa* which appears to mean “to put on” (Kuhn 1968: 168, s.v.) and taken together these stanzas appear to suggest that the head covering of stanza 28 attaches to Móðir’s social status.”

Lindow provides further examples of the *faldr*’s significance as a symbol of marriage from *Laxadeala Saga*. As Lindow demonstrates, the *faldr* “is unequivocally a symbol of marriage.” Thus by use of the word *ripti* or *faldr*, the message is clear that Nanna’s role as wife, mother, female head of household and sexual partner are at an end, since she no longer needs these accoutrements, while Frigg’s is reemphasized. Coming from the underworld, a covering for the earth-goddess made of flax, is probably best interpreted as new spring vegetation. By the same token, the linen garment Frigg receives from the underworld is reminiscent of the gift that Zas (Zeus) provides to his bride (Chthonie). In the early Greek myth, it is woven from sky, sea, etc.<sup>26</sup> Ursula Dronke further compares this story to the courtship of Frey and Gerd as told in *Skirnismál*, another myth widely accepted as representing *hieros gamos*.<sup>27</sup>

For his father, Baldur gives Hermod the reduplicating ring Draupnir, the same gift refused by Gerd, who is generally taken to be the representative of the frozen earth In *Skirnismál*, the ring is said to have been “burned on Baldur’s breast,” a direct allusion to this story. In Snorri’s tale, some scholars interpret the finger ring that Hermod brings back for Fulla as a duplicate of Draupnir, and therefore also a sign of fertility. Both the

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<sup>25</sup> Lindow, *ibid*, p.123-124.

<sup>26</sup> West, *ibid*, pg. 373.

<sup>27</sup> For examples, see Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, *The Religion of the Teutons* (1902), p. 269; Dronke, *Poetic Edda*, Vol. II (1997), p. 396-397.

veil and the ring are ancient symbols of marriage. The Old Norse sources certainly do not lack clues that Frigg is the Earth Mother. In the *Völuspá* verses, Frigg's home is named *Fensalir*, which means “halls of the fen.” A fen is a low-lying wetland. In ancient times, life was thought to spontaneously generate in marshy land. Before man had knowledge of reproductive biology, insects, amphibians and other creatures were thought to spring fully formed from Earth's bosom.