

6-15-2020

“In their lord’s great need”: A Succession Myth in the Rāmāyaṇa and Beowulf

Karl E.H Seigfried
Illinois Institute of Technology, kseigfried@iit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.shawnee.edu/indicreligions>



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Seigfried, Karl E.H (2020) "“In their lord’s great need”: A Succession Myth in the Rāmāyaṇa and Beowulf," *International Journal of Indic Religions*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.shawnee.edu/indicreligions/vol2/iss3/4>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Shawnee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Indic Religions by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Shawnee State University. For more information, please contact jstewart@shawnee.edu.

"In their lord's great need": A Succession Myth in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Beowulf*

Karl E. H. Seigfried

Adjunct Professor in Humanities, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago IL

Theology and Religious History Faculty, Cherry Hill Seminary, Chicago IL

Email: kseigfried@iit.edu

Abstract

Both the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Old English *Beowulf* contain tales of a monstrous figure of the outside world who threatens a hero-king's sleeping subjects, and who is then followed to a chthonic setting and vanquished in combat. Both also feature companions who must decide whether to enter the cave and help the hero-king or remain outside and follow their lord's instructions to patiently await the outcome of the struggle. This paper argues that the two texts present variations on a shared myth of succession centered on worthiness and shared glory that evokes elements of warrior-initiation, manhood ritual, and brotherly rebirth.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa*; *Beowulf*; Warrior;

Both the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Old English *Beowulf* contain tales of a monstrous figure of the outside world who threatens a hero-king's sleeping subjects, and who is then followed to a chthonic setting and vanquished in combat. Both also feature companions who must decide whether to enter the cave and help the hero-king or remain outside and follow their lord's instructions to patiently await the outcome of the struggle. This paper argues that the two texts present variations on a shared myth of succession centered on worthiness and shared glory that evokes elements of warrior-initiation, manhood ritual, and brotherly rebirth.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed over a period ranging from perhaps as early as the seventh century BCE to as late as the fourth century CE,¹ is credited to the poet Vālmīki (who also appears as a character in the text). In *Kiṣkindhā*, the fourth book of the lengthy poem, the rightful-king-in-exile Rāma meets the monkey Sugrīva, who tells him how he accompanied his older brother King Vālin as he followed a threatening monster and fought it in a cave. Sugrīva actually tells the story

¹ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book One: Boyhood*, xx.

to Rāma three times: first from his own point of view (IV.9.4-10.8), then in the supposedly quoted words of Vālin (IV.10.9-20), and finally in a retelling that conflates the story with a separate monster tale (IV.45.3-12). The triple telling reflects a practice shared by the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Beowulf*, and other long-form “epic” poems of repeatedly retelling the story of a single important or troubling incident, often from a variety of perspectives. After hearing Sugrīva’s story, Rāma famously makes the questionable decision of supporting the usurper, shoots his older brother Vālin while the two monkeys are fighting each other (IV.16.25), and insures that the younger brother wins the throne.

In *Beowulf*, composed by an anonymous poet at some point between the mid-seventh and the early eleventh centuries CE,² the titular character fights three monsters. Bēowulf battles the monstrous Grendel in the hall of King Hrōðgar, whom the young hero Bēowulf has vowed to defend (710-836). After defeating him, Bēowulf follows Grendel’s mother and fights her in an underwater cave (1399-1650). Finally, the now-elderly King Bēowulf fights a dragon who has attacked his own hall (2538-2820). While the *Rāmāyaṇa* told of a single incident in three different ways, *Beowulf* divides the myth into three parts. Only when the encounters with monsters are examined together do they give the complete picture of the core myth.

G.L. Kittredge long ago warned against “the temptation to genealogize,” arguing that “the defence of a hall or a hut against the demon that haunts it is a simple theme, to which the theory of ‘independent origins’ must apply if it ever applies to anything.”³ This paper does not argue for a genetic relationship (whether of text or teller) between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Beowulf*, or delve into the vexed question of an Indo-European diaspora. Instead, the analysis below aims to show that the two texts do not simply share a generic and superficial folk-form, but indeed present alternative

² Fulk, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, clxxix.

³ Kittredge, “Arthur and Gollagon,” 230.

versions of a single myth with numerous points of contact at a fine level of detail. To paraphrase Georges Dumézil, what differences there are between the stories of Vālin and Bēowulf merely prove that India is not England.⁴ The close correspondences of the two stories are striking enough on their own, but they become even more noteworthy when placed in the various contexts here discussed.

There have been many scholars who mention the two texts together, yet very few have discussed the intersections of the works in any detail. Typical of passing references to connections between the two texts is Peter F. Fisher's 1958 remark that both are "individualistic epics in which the emphasis is placed on the trials of the hero with the hero as the central and dominating figure,"⁵ an observation so general as to be nearly meaningless. Alexander Haggerty Krappe's 1927 discussion of "a medieval Indian parallel to *Beowulf*," unfortunately for the purposes of this paper, draws a connection to Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, not Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁶

The sole monograph focusing on connections between the two works is I.S. Peter's *Beowulf and the Rāmāyaṇa: A Study in Epic Poetry*, the published version of his 1934 Ph.D. thesis for the University of London. It contains confident declarations typical of the time, such as the assertion that, since its hero fights both a mere-monster and a dragon, *Beowulf* "thus fails to comply with the Aristotelian rule, that the epic should have for its subject a single theme."⁷ Peter also early concludes that "there is... nothing mythical in the themes of the epic."⁸ His explication of the *Rāmāyaṇa* includes such unfortunate statements as "The universal worship of the ape-god

⁴ Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, 23. "All this is true, but it would only prove, if there were need of it, that India is not Iceland and that the two stories were told in civilizations that in content and form had developed in almost diametrically opposite directions."

⁵ Fisher, "The Trials of the Epic Hero in *Beowulf*," 172.

⁶ Krappe, "Eine mittelalterlich-indische Parallele zum *Beowulf*," 54.

⁷ Peter, *Beowulf and the Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

Hanumant is an invasion of aboriginal belief into Aryan religion.”⁹ Although Peter devotes four pages to “The Vāli-Sugrīva Story” (18-21), he makes no connection between the chthonic monster-battles of the Sanskrit and Old English poems either there or in the concluding chapter on “Common Characteristics of Heroic Poetry” (112-28).

J. Michael Stitt’s *Beowulf and the Bear’s Son: Epic, Saga, and Fairytale in the Northern Germanic Tradition* (1992) examines both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Beowulf* in the context of a larger discussion of the “The Bear’s Son” folktale form. In a wide-ranging, multicultural investigation, Stitt presents a great variety of tales and catalogs their structural elements. He includes the story of Vālin and Sugrīva as an analog of “the Scandinavian Two-Troll tradition” and an example of “a specialized development of an internationally distributed mythic-heroic dragonslayer tradition.”¹⁰ Aside from this general (and strongly Scandocentric) comment, Stitt’s only remark on the Vālin episode is to suggest that the motive of misinterpreting a sign of blood is shared with *Beowulf* and shows “that the roots of the Grendel episode lie in a distinct and relatively stable subset of the Indo-European tradition-complex.”¹¹ Stitt concludes his study of the structure of similar stories by stating that

It is impossible to determine the meaning of the tradition and then project it onto *Beowulf* or a particular saga. The tradition, as defined here, is simply a sequence of motifs related in structurally constant patterns. The tradition *per se* is essentially meaningless. Ultimately, meaning is created (or recreated) anew each time the tradition is realized in some specific narrative and social context.¹²

Since Stitt does not discuss these contexts, this is a somewhat disappointing conclusion for his wonderfully detailed work. However, it does provide a starting point for an investigation of the

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear’s Son*, 128.

¹¹ Ibid., 205.

¹² Ibid., 208.

Rāmāyaṇa and *Beowulf* narratives at hand. In the contexts of their respective works, the tales of Vālin and Bēowulf both relate to the same central problem.

The issue of succession is at the core of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The initial impetus for the events of the text is the interruption of rightful transfer of power in the kingdom of Ayodhyā. Bound to grant his young wife Kaikeyī a boon, King Daśaratha is forced to royally consecrate his second son Bharata instead of his rightful heir and firstborn son Rāma. Not only is Rāma divested of his role as succeeding king, but he is banished to the wilderness at Kaikeyī's insistence.¹³ The main plotline of the book then focuses on the abduction and rescue of Rāma's wife Sītā, yet his goal of returning to his kingdom as its rightful ruler remains as the overarching framework.

The story of Vālin and Sugrīva is "a splendid minor plot to set off the major plot."¹⁴ The betrayal of the older brother by the younger usurper and its ultimately fatal consequences presents an example of what Gary Saul Morson calls sideshadowing – a narrative provides "the shadow of an alternative present" that "allows us to see what might have been and therefore changes our view of what is."¹⁵ Vālin and Sugrīva present dystopian versions of Rāma (who leaves his kingdom to enter the outer world) and Bharata (who is presented with the opportunity to take the crown), and their story shows how wrong Rāma's own tale could have gone, had his own younger brother not behaved in such a beatific manner. This is a case of what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls "mythical speculations," narratives which

do not seek to depict what is real, but to justify the shortcomings of reality, since the extreme positions are only *imagined* in order to show that they are *untenable*. This step, which is fitting for mythical thought, implies an admission (but in the veiled language of the myth) that the social facts when thus examined are marred by an insurmountable contradiction.¹⁶

¹³ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Two: Ayódhya*, 63 (10.26-9).

¹⁴ Peter, 18.

¹⁵ Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 11.

¹⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, 30.

The story of Sugrīva is a myth within a myth, raised to another degree of distancing by Sugrīva's retelling of Vālin's telling of the tale.

Succession is also a central and problematic issue in *Beowulf*, especially in the Danish hall where Bēowulf's adventures begin. The question of succession already appears in the first lines of the poem, when the son of the mythical King Scyld ("Shield") is advised to be generous to warriors during his father's lifetime, to ensure that they will be loyal to him when he himself succeeds to the kingship (12-16). Much later, the widow of Bēowulf's newly-deceased king (and uncle) offers him the throne instead of giving it to her immature son (2369-2372). Bēowulf declines and takes the throne only after the death of the son, but he ends his life without a son of his own, passing on the kingship to a youth who may be his nephew (as will be discussed below). Bēowulf's noble restraint is in direct contrast to Sugrīva's selfishness; Vālin's younger brother takes the throne in place of Vālin's son, Aṅgada.

"Hereditary kingship is accepted in *Beowulf*," writes Kenneth Sisam, "but not the strict rule of primogeniture."¹⁷ King Hrōðgar tells Bēowulf that he had assumed the leadership of the Danes after the death of his older brother Heregār: "then was Heregār dead, my elder kinsman unliving, son of Healfdene; he was better than I!"¹⁸ The poem gives no mention of the manner of Heregār's death, nor does it tell of the fate of his son Heoroward, who should have inherited the throne by the rules of primogeniture.¹⁹ Did Hrōðgar eliminate his older brother in order to take his throne? Questions of unlawful usurpation also hover over the next generation. When Hrōðgar's wife Wealhþēo hears that the king wishes to take Bēowulf "as son,"²⁰ she worries about the fate of her

¹⁷ Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf*, 37.

¹⁸ Fulk, 18 (467-9). *ða wæs Heregār dēad, mīn yldra mæg unlifigende, bearn Healfdenes; sē wæs betera ðonne ic!* This and all translations from *Beowulf* are my own.

¹⁹ Morey, "The Fates of Men in *Beowulf*," 37.

²⁰ Fulk, 41 (1175). *for sunu.*

own sons and publicly expresses her hope that Hrōðgar's nephew Hrōðulf "will repay our sons with good."²¹ The poem is again silent on the details of the succession, yet early Danish historians suggest that Hrēðrīc succeeded his father Hrōðgar only to be slain by the usurping nephew Hrōðulf.²² Earlier scholars such as Peter take the usurpation for granted.²³ As in Rāma's helping of Sugrīva, Bēowulf is a not-yet-king who acts the part of an avenging hero for a (possible) usurper who is incapable of securing his goals on his own.

The myth of succession being posited here contains five elements. The first three are shared by both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Beowulf*.

Element 1: Attack. A single monstrous outsider threatens or attacks the sleeping members of the in-group. The reason for the attack is unimportant; the threat to the subjects of the hero-king is the focus.

Element 2: Pursuit. After the threat to the sleepers, the hero-king leaves the inner stronghold and follows the monster to its home in the outer world.

Element 3: Battle. The hero-king enters the cave and vanquishes the monster in a chthonic battle.

The two texts diverge at this point and present two variations on the mythic action. Both center on the reaction of the hero-king's companion. Within both texts, the first choice (abandonment) is clearly presented as the wrong action to take.

Element 4 (Variation 1): Abandonment. The hero-king is abandoned by his companion(s) after a sign of blood.

Element 4 (Variation 2): Assistance. A young man comes to the aid of the hero-king.

²¹ Ibid., 42 (1184-5). *mid gōde gyldan wille uncran eaferan.*

²² Swanton, *Beowulf*, 195.

²³ Peter, 11.

The two different conclusions to the myth necessarily follow the choices made by the companions in the preceding element. Again, the first choice (usurpation) is presented as improper, although the ultimate outcome is beneficial to the one who made the ethically wrong choice.

Element 5 (Variation 1): Usurpation. The companion who abandons the hero-king usurps the kingdom.

Element 5 (Variation 2): Appointment. The companion who assists the hero-king is given the kingdom.

Such is the form of the myth, with its two variations of outcome. The elements will now be examined in detail, as they appear in the two central texts and in related literature.

Element 1: Attack. *A single monstrous outsider threatens or attacks the sleeping members of the in-group. The reason for the attack is unimportant; the threat to the subjects of the hero-king is the focus.*

When Sugrīva first tells his story to Rāma, he describes the arrival of the *ásura* (“anti-god”) Māyāvin (“Magician”) with a questionable causality:

Now, it is well known that because of a woman there was great hostility in former times between Valin and the firstborn son of Dúndubhi, powerful Mayávin. One night when people were asleep, he came to the gates of Kishkíndha. Roaring angrily, he challenged Valin to battle.²⁴

Nowhere in Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* is there an elaboration of who this woman is or how she caused hostility between Vālin and Māyāvin. We can surmise that the contention was over Tārā (“Star”), the wife of Vālin desired by Sugrīva. However, this is conjecture with no direct evidence in the text. The reason for the attack is of far less importance than the fact that the attack happens, and that the threat to the sleeping folk draws the king out from his stronghold to protect them.

²⁴ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four: Kiṣkindhā*, 69 (9.4-5). *Māyāvi nāma tejasvī pūrvajo Dundubheḥ sutaḥ tena tasya mahad vairam strīkṛtam viśrutam purā. sat u supte jane rātrau Kiṣkindhādvāram āgataḥ. nardati sma susamrabho Vāliṇam c’ āhvayad raṇe.*

The *Beowulf* narration likewise provides scant evidence for the reasons behind Grendel's attack on Hrōðgar's hall Heorot:

Then the powerful spirit endured the time with difficulty, he who waited in the shadows, that he each day heard loud rejoicing in the hall. There was the music of the harp, the clear song of the singer.²⁵

This is the only motive given for Grendel's attack, if it indeed is a motive. That this passage occurs directly after the description of the building of Heorot (67-85) calls to mind Jacob Grimm's remark on another supernatural outsider of medieval literature:

It is morally abhorrent to the dwarves, when churches are built, *bell-ringing* disturbs them in their ancient secrecy; they also hate the clearing of the forests, agriculture and new stamping-mills in the mountains.²⁶

However, the *Beowulf* poet draws no direct line between the "loud rejoicing" and Grendel's first attack. After an aside on the creation of the earth and the origin of various monsters (90-114), Grendel goes to "inspect... the high house" in which he finds "a troop of nobles sleeping after a feast."²⁷ This inspection is followed by the first of his many attacks on the somnolent inhabitants of Heorot (120-125). As with Māyāvin's motivation, our assumptions about what drives Grendel are conjectural (like much of Grimm's work), and the text gives no strong sense of what drives the attack. What matters is that the outside entity attacks the king's followers.

The motive for the subsequent attack by Grendel's unnamed mother is a simple one: "to avenge [her] son's death."²⁸ Like Māyāvin and Grendel, she attacks at night while the people are asleep. Notably, she attacks an important follower of Hrōðgar the king, not of Bēowulf the hero

²⁵ Fulk, 6 (86-90). *Da se ellengæst earfoðlice þræge geþolde, sē þe in þystrum bād, þæt hē dogora gehwām dream gehyrde hlūdne in healle. Ðær wæs hearpan swēg, swutol sang scopes.*

²⁶ Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 428. *es ist den zwerge innerlich zuwider, wenn kirchen gebaut werden, glockengeläute stört sie in ihrer alten heimlichkeit; auch das retuen der wälder, den ackerbau und neue pochwerke im gebirg hassen sie.* My translation. Emphasis in original.

²⁷ Fulk, 7 (115-119). *nēosian... hēan huses / æþelinga gedriht swefan æfter symble.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45 (1278). *sunu dēoð wrecan.*

(1296, 1325). The threat to those under the king's protection is the key element in this section of the myth.

After Bēowulf has ruled as king for fifty years, a dragon attacks “his own home, best of halls” in the night.²⁹ Again, we have an attack on the sleeping followers of the king. The reason for the devastating onslaught is almost comically unimportant; a slave fleeing an abusive master has stolen a single “ornamented cup” from the “immense legacy” of the dragon’s “heathen horde.”³⁰ Inspired by *Beowulf*, J.R.R. Tolkien played up the humor of a dragon driven to destructive wrath by the loss of the tiniest fraction of his vast store of treasure in *The Hobbit*. As in the cases of Māyāvin and Grendel, the motivation for the nighttime devastation of Bēowulf’s dragon is given only the slightest rationale, underscoring that the events are part of myth’s “special kind of logic, rather like that of the Mad Hatter’s tea-party” in which “normal reasoning and normal relationships may be suspended or distorted” and “minor actions turn out to have profound consequences.”³¹ Events, not motivations, contain the meaning of the mythic narrative. Logical rationales for the actions of the monsters of the outside are not of great importance. What is central is how the heroes respond to these actions.

Element 2: Pursuit. *After the threat to the sleepers, the hero-king leaves the inner stronghold and follows the monster to its home in the outer world.*

In a reversal of the image of Grendel bothered by the sounds of the hall, Sugrīva tells Rāma how Vālin is disturbed by the sound of Māyāvin’s roared challenge:

Now, my brother Valin, who was asleep, could not bear it when he heard that frightful-sounding roar, and he quickly rushed out. As he left in a rage to kill that

²⁹ Ibid., 80 (2325-6). *his sylfes hām, bolda sēlest.*

³⁰ Ibid., 78, 76, 76 (2282, 2234, 2216). *fæted wæge / eormenlāfe / hæðnum horde.*

³¹ Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, 269.

great *ásura*, the women and I respectfully tried to restrain him. But the powerful monkey brushed all of us aside and went out.³²

Frightened by the appearance of Vālin and his companion Sugrīva, the *ásura* flees. The two monkeys pursue Māyāvin along a moonlit road, "but the *ásura* plunged into a great cavern in the ground which was hard to reach and covered with grass. The two of us reached the entrance and stopped."³³ Before entering the cavern himself, Vālin tells Sugrīva, "Wait here attentively at the entrance to this cavern, Sugrīva, while I go in there and kill my enemy in battle,"³⁴ insisting that he "cannot return to the city without destroying the *ásura*."³⁵ Vālin makes his younger brother swear by his feet, apparently to remain at the entrance (IV.9.14).

After Grendel's mother attacks the hall, Hrōðgar and Bēowulf (the elderly king and the hero who acts on his behalf) pursue her from the inner world of community along "forest paths" into an outer place described in terms similar to those used of Māyāvin's cavern: "hidden land" reached by "dangerous passage across a fen."³⁶ They are accompanied by both Hrōðgar's retainers and Bēowulf's companions. The entrance to Māyāvin's cavern is a grass-covered spot on a mountain (IV.45.3-4); the entrance to the cavern of Grendel's mother is marked by "mountain-trees over hoary stone."³⁷ After asking the king to watch over his comrades in the event of his death (1473), Bēowulf enters the water that leads to the hidden cave (1492), leaving the retainers and companions to wait at the shore.

³² Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 69 (9.6-8). *prasuptas tu mama bhrātā narditaṃ bhairavasvanam śrutvā na mamṛṣe Vālī niṣpapāta javāt tadā. sa tu vai niḥsṛtaḥ krodhāt taṃ hantum asur'ōttamam vāryamāṇas tataḥ strībhīr mayā ca praṇat'ātmanā. sat u nirdhūya sarvān no nirjagāma mahābalaḥ.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 69 (9.11). *sa ṛṇair āvṛtaṃ durgamaṃ dharanyā vivaraṃ mahat. praviveś āsuro vegād āvām āsādya viṣṭhitau.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71 (9.13). *iha tvam tiṣṭha, Sugrīva, biladvāri samāhitaḥ yāvad atra praviśy' āham nihanmi samara ripum.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75 (10.13). *ahatvā n' āsti me śaktiḥ pratigantum itaḥ purīm.*

³⁶ Fulk, 49, 47 (1403, 1357-9). *waldswaḡum / dygel lond... frēcne fengelād.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 49 (1414-15). *fyrgeñbēamas ofer hārne stān.*

After the dragon's attack, Bēowulf and a group of "dear comrades"³⁸ are led by the cup-stealing slave to the dragon's lair (2401-13). Again we see the conjunction of a path to an outer region and a hidden entrance; the dragon "watched over the hoard in a high house... a path unknown to people lay beneath."³⁹ The lair is "fast through the art of making entrance difficult."⁴⁰ Given the theme of troubled succession, it is noteworthy that Bēowulf now tells his followers the story of King Hrēðel's eldest son Herebeald being accidentally shot by his younger brother Hæðcyn. The king is grieved that the laws of kinship prevent him from avenging his first son's death, and he reluctantly names the killer as his successor (2435-2471). The story is often compared to the myth of Odin's son Baldr being unwittingly shot by his brother Höðr,⁴¹ but its appearance here brings to mind both Daśaratha's unwilling spurning of his eldest son and Rāma's shooting of Vālin on behalf of his younger brother. As Vālin tells Sugrīva to wait for him, Bēowulf orders his companions to remain outside of the cave and await the outcome of his battle (2529).

Element 3: Battle. *The hero-king enters the cave and vanquishes the monster in a chthonic battle.*

According to the first telling of the tale by Sugrīva, Vālin spends a full year seeking and fighting Māyāvin within the cave. It is told three times that Vālin killed the *ásura* (IV.9.21, 10.15, 45.9). Only in the nested retelling of Vālin's words within Sugrīva's first telling is it mentioned that the monkey king "killed that fearsome *ásura* enemy together with his kinsmen."⁴² Given Bēowulf's fight with Grendel's mother and the wider context of the folkloric "Two-Troll tradition," in which the hero follows the monster to the cave and must then face an additional

³⁸ Ibid., 86 (2518). *swæse gesīðas*.

³⁹ Ibid., 75 (2212-14). *on hēaum hofe hord beweotode... stīg under læg eldum uncūð*.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77 (2243). *nearocræftum fæst*.

⁴¹ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, 121.

⁴² Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 75 (10.15). *nihataś ca mayā tatra so 'suro bandhubhiḥ saha*.

family member,⁴³ does this remark about the *ásura*'s kinsmen in the cave suggest the presence of a fuller myth behind the story presented in the *Rāmāyaṇa*? Vālin reports that, as Māyāvin dies, the stream of blood flowing from his mouth fills the cavern and makes it "impassable."⁴⁴ This is an element that will appear in various forms in several other sources.

J. Moussaieff Masson suggests that Vālin's battle reflects "a common childhood fantasy... in which the little boy imagines himself inside the mother's womb (cf. the cave that Vālin enters) with one overriding dread: that he will encounter therein the father's penis, a dangerous and punishing object."⁴⁵ It is very difficult to read the sketchily-portrayed Māyāvin as a father figure. Like Rāma, he is introduced as a "firstborn son,"⁴⁶ and his conflict with Vālin seems one of equal age or stature, given their past competition over the unnamed woman. One could insert yet more Freudianism by asserting that the woman in question was Vālin's mother, but that would overstep Masson into complete absurdity.

After diving into the water, Bēowulf spends a "long part of the day"⁴⁷ seeking the pool's bottom. Grendel's mother finds him and drags him into a "hostile hall"⁴⁸ beneath the water. When Bēowulf attacks, the sword Hrunting ("Thrust") fails for the first time in its history (1527), suggesting that Grendel's mother may have supernatural protection against human weapons – something that would be a boon from one of the gods, if this were a Sanskrit story. Bēowulf is saved from the knife of Grendel's mother by a charm of his own (1550); her blade is stopped by his shirt of chainmail forged by Wēland (455), the wondrous smith of Germanic legend who

⁴³ Stitt, 58.

⁴⁴ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 75 (10.16). *durākrāmaṃ*.

⁴⁵ Masson, "Fratricide Among the Monkeys: Psychoanalytic Observations on an Episode in the Vālmīkirāmāyaṇam," 674-675.

⁴⁶ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 69 (9.4). *pūrvajo*.

⁴⁷ Fulk, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 51 (1495). *hwil dæges*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* *nīðsele*.

appears in Old Norse sources as Völundr. Bēowulf defeats Grendel’s mother when he finds “a victory-blessed blade, an ancient sword made by giants”⁴⁹ that overcomes whatever boon-like protection she has. After cutting off her head (1563), he performs the same service for the corpse of Grendel himself (1584) – acts which suggest a connection of the monsters to the *draugar* of the Icelandic sagas, the undead revenants that leave their burial mounds to stalk the halls of the living and can only be permanently stopped by decapitation. As with the flood of blood flowing from the dying *ásura*’s mouth that makes Vālin’s escape difficult, the blood of Grendel’s dying mother takes away part of the glory of Bēowulf’s victory by melting the blade of the giant weapon he used to kill her (1605).

As the older Bēowulf faces the dragon at the entrance to the “earth-hall... the cave under the earth,”⁵⁰ he is again let down when Nægling (“Nail”), another trusted sword, fails (2584). Given Rāma’s snapping of the celestial bow that no other can even string,⁵¹ it is notable that Bēowulf’s weapon breaks because his hand is so strong that it shatters every proven sword it carries to battle (2682-7). The narrator states that “it was not granted to him that iron swords might help him in battle,”⁵² implying the influence of fate (*wyrd*) that is so often alluded to in the poem (and which is also used as a convenient cause in Sanskrit stories). Bēowulf is unable to finish off the dragon, which leads to the role of Wiglāf discussed below.

It is important to remark that Bēowulf’s death comes from the poison in the wounds caused by the dragon; as the blood from the mouth of the dying *ásura* causes problems for Vālin and the blood from the neck of Grendel’s mother melts Bēowulf’s weapon, the poison from the mouth of the dying dragon causes the death of Bēowulf. That Bēowulf and the dragon are each other’s bane

⁴⁹ Ibid., 53 (1557-8). *sigeēadig bil, ealdsweord eotenisc.*

⁵⁰ Ibid., 83 (2410-11). *eorðsele... hlæw under hrūsan.*

⁵¹ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book One*, 319 (66.16-18).

⁵² Fulc, 91 (2682-4). *Him þæt gifede ne wæs þæt him īrenna ecge mihton helpan æt hilde.*

is also reminiscent of the final fate of the god Norse god Thórr, who is overcome by the poisonous breath of the World Serpent after he slays the monster with his hammer. In all of these cases, the blood or other fluid from the head and neck of the vanquished outsider is problematic for the victorious hero.

Many of these elements appear together as far back as the Sanskrit hymns of the *R̥g Veda*, composed around 1000 BCE.⁵³ The dragon Vṛtra challenges the thunder-god Indra, who kills him by striking him in the neck with his thunder-weapon. At his death, the waters he has swallowed flow free from his pierced neck for the benefit of humanity. After killing Vṛtra, Indra kills the dragon's mother Dānu with his weapon. Both mother and son lie dead together as the waters hide Vṛtra's corpse and "secret place."⁵⁴ In this source, two thousand years older than the *Beowulf* manuscript, we see the challenge, the battle in a hidden location, the beheading, the uncanny flow of liquid from the head/neck (although here beneficial), and the secondary killing of the monster's mother.

Element 4 (Variation 1): Abandonment. *The hero-king is abandoned by his companion(s) after a sign of blood.*

Sugrīva tells Rāma why he abandoned Vālin and left his post outside the cavern:

Then, after a long time, I saw red foaming blood gush from the cavern, and I was in anguish. And to my ears came the echo of *ásuras* roaring and the sound of my elder brother crying out. Now, judging by these signs that my brother was slain, I blocked the entrance to the cavern with a rock the size of a mountain. Grief-stricken, I offered funeral libations for him and returned to Kishkíndha, my friend.⁵⁵

⁵³ Doniger, *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, 1.

⁵⁴ Doniger, *The Rig Veda*, 150 (L.32.10).

⁵⁵ Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 69 (9.17-19). *atha dīrghasya kālasya bilāt tasmād viniṣṛtam saphenam rudhiram raktam aham dṛṣtvā suduḥkhītaḥ. nardatām asurāṇām ca dhvanir me śrotram āgataḥ nirastasya ca saṃgrāme krośato niḥsvano guroḥ. aham tv avagato buddhyā cihnais tair bhrātaram hatam pidhāya ca biladvāram śilayā girimātrayā. śokārtaś c' ōdakaṃ kṛtvā Kiṣkindhām āgataḥ, sakhe.*

When Sugrīva later briefly retells the story, the gush has become a flood: “And then the hole was filled with a torrent of blood.”⁵⁶ As in his first report to Rāma, he assumes that his brother has been killed, blocks the entrance to trap the enemy, and returns to Kishkīndha. Vālin is now doubly entrapped within the cave; both the flow of blood within the cave and the rock blocking the entrance prevent his return to his kingdom.

After Bēowulf has beheaded both Grendel and his mother, the men watching the waters above the cave see “that the surging water was all mingled, water stained with blood.”⁵⁷ Hrōðgar’s elderly advisors together declare Bēowulf dead, and the king returns to his hall with his retinue. Although Bēowulf’s own men remain sadly staring at the pool, none makes a move to help the hero and none expects to see his return (1602). The motive of the surging blood is, as in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, misinterpreted by the companions and leads to abandonment (in the case of the Hrōðgar’s men) and loss of hope (in Bēowulf’s men).

When Bēowulf’s fight against the dragon begins to go badly for him, his followers flee the scene: “Not at all did his comrades, sons of nobles, stand around him valourously in a troop, but they fled to the wood to save their lives.”⁵⁸ Here, the sign seems to be the flames that spring up around the hero-king, rather than the blood at the cave-mouth. However, the narrator remarks that, before Bēowulf enters the fight, he sees

standing stone-arches, a stream out from them gushing forth from the barrow; there the surging of the stream was hot with battle-fires, it could not pass through unburning for any space of time deep near the hoard because of the dragon’s fire.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid., 297 (45.6). *tataḥ kṣatajavegena āpupūre tadā bilam.*

⁵⁷ Fulk, 54 (1593-4). *þæt wæs yðgeblond eal gemenged, brim blōde fah.*

⁵⁸ Ibid., 89 (2596-9). *Nealles him on hēape handgesteallan, æðlinga bearn ymbe gestōdon hyldecystum, ac hy on holt bugon, ealdre burgan.*

⁵⁹ Ibid., 87 (2545-9). *stondan stānbogan, stream ūt þonan breacan of beorge; wæs þære burnan wælm heaðofyrum hāt, ne meakte horde nēah unbyrende ænige hwīle dēop gedygan for dracan lēge.*

The blood-sign isn't necessary at the end of the fight, since Bēowulf's men can see the struggle before they flee. However, the mythic element remains and is moved to the beginning of battle. Like the blood that flows from the mouth of Māyāvin and the necks of Grendel and his mother, the water that flows from the cave entrance here is made threatening by the mouth of the monster – in this case, by the flames it belches forth. There is still a connection between the sign and the abandonment, as these are the same flames that are later read as a portent of disaster by the men who desert Bēowulf.

Composed in approximately 450 CE, halfway between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Beowulf*, the Sanskrit *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* includes a story of Kṛṣṇa that parallels the cave myth through the abandonment variation. Although the idea that Rāma is a form of the deity Viṣṇu has not entered this paper's discussion, it should be noted that Kṛṣṇa is also an avatar of the god. In this tale, a jewel presented to a human king by the sun god is stolen by Jāmbavat, the king of the bears, who gives it to his son. Among its magical powers, the jewel "gave daily eight loads of gold,"⁶⁰ similar to the god Odin's Draupnir ("Dripper") in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (circa 1220), a ring which gives every ninth night eight rings of gold.⁶¹

In a progression that should now be familiar, the hero pursues the enemy from the place of men to the outer world, finds the enemy's son with an older woman (in this case a nurse) in a cave in a mountain, fights the monster (here the father) in the cave, and is abandoned by his followers who "waited there for seven or eight days expecting his return but as [he] did not come they arrived at the conclusion that he must have been destroyed in the cave... They therefore went away, and came back to [the city] and announced that Kṛṣṇa had been killed."⁶² Kṛṣṇa is ultimately victorious

⁶⁰ Dutt, *The Viṣṇu Mahāpurāṇam*, 276 (IV.13).

⁶¹ Snorri, *Edda*, 50.

⁶² Dutt, 276-7 (IV.13).

and returns with the jewel. In the present context, it is noteworthy that Kṛṣṇa fights the monster and recovers the jewel on behalf of a nobleman who has caused the death of his brother and who benefits from an alliance with the visiting hero; there are clear similarities to the case of both Sugrīva-Rāma and Hrōðgar-Bēowulf.

Element 4 (Variation 2): Assistance. *A young man comes to the aid of the hero-king.*

Bēowulf's youthful kinsman Wīglāf is the only member of the retinue who refuses to abandon the king in his distress. He wades through the poisonous exhalations of the dragon and seeks protection from the monster's flaming breath behind Bēowulf's shield. When the king's sword shatters and the dragon seizes him by the neck with its mouth, Wīglāf ignores the head and instead uses his weapon (an "ancient sword made by giants,"⁶³ like the one Bēowulf used to kill Grendel's mother) to strike the dragon "a little lower down."⁶⁴ Bēowulf then uses a knife to deliver the final deathblow to the dragon.

This assistance by the young man for the hero-king is reminiscent of a story in the *Edda* in which the god Thórr fights the *jötunn* Hrungrir ("Brawler").⁶⁵ The term *jötunn* is thought to be related to the verb *eta* ("to eat"),⁶⁶ and it is Hrungrir's monstrous appetite that brings him into conflict with Thórr. He comes from Jötunheimr ("*jötunn*-world") to the halls of the gods and is invited in for a drink while Thórr is absent. After getting drunk while drinking from Thórr's own goblets, he threatens to kill the gods and abduct two of the goddesses. When Thórr returns, Hrungrir challenges him to a duel at Grjótúnagarðar ("stone town enclosure") in a moment reminiscent of the dragon Vṛtra's challenge to Indra, the parallel Indian deity to Thórr, likewise

⁶³ Fulk, 89 (2616). *ealdsweord etonisc*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 92 (2699). *nioðor hwēne*.

⁶⁵ Snorri, 77-79.

⁶⁶ Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, 99.

made when the outsider is "muddled by drunkenness."⁶⁷ Hrungrir's companions worry that Thórr will come after them if he kills Hrungrir, so they build a giant figure out of clay, give it the heart of a mare, and set it next to Hrungrir. As Thórr battles Hrungrir, his young human follower Þjálfi (possibly "Serving-elf"⁶⁸) fights the clay figure. Thórr is victorious, but is temporarily trapped when Hrungrir falls and one of his legs pins the god by the neck. Þjálfi easily defeats the clay figure.

This Old Icelandic episode contains many of the elements discussed above: the outsider's threat to the hall, the dispute over a female figure, the challenge to the hero-king, the journey to the outside realm (the "stone town enclosure" is clearly the domain of Hrungrir, who is himself made of stone), the symbolic (but not greatly effectual) assistance of the youthful companion, the striking "a little lower down" by the companion (the clay figure is named Mökkurkálfi, "cloud-calf [of the leg]"), and the entrapment of the hero-king after his victory.

Dumézil long ago suggested that Snorri's story preserved an "initiation myth,"⁶⁹ and the story of Þjálfi can provide an additional perspective from which to examine the tales of Sugrīva and Wīglāf. In his commentaries on the Gallic War, Julius Caesar writes of the youth of the *Germani* hunting the aurochs, the enormous (and now extinct) wild bull that formerly roamed Europe:

These the Germans slay zealously, by taking them in pits; by such work the young men harden themselves and by this kind of hunting train themselves, and those who have slain most of them bring the horns with them to a public place for a testimony thereof, and win great renown.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Doniger, *The Rig Veda*, 150 (I.32.6).

⁶⁸ Orchard, 159.

⁶⁹ Dumézil, 70.

⁷⁰ Caesar, *The Gallic War*, 353 (VI.28): *Hos studiose foveis captos interficiunt. Hoc se labore Durant adulescentes atque hoc genere venationis exercent, et qui plurimos ex his interfecerunt, relatis in publicum cornibus, quae sint testimonio, magnam ferunt laudem.*

Hilda Ellis Davidson has glossed this passage as “a test of manhood among German youths, who had to trap [the aurochs] in a pit and then go down and kill it single-handed.”⁷¹ If her interpretation is correct, we have a “real world” initiation ritual involving chthonic battle with an enormous creature.

There is also an intersection with Sugrīva’s final retelling of Vālin’s story, in which he names Vālin’s opponent as Dúndubhi (IV.45.3); in the first telling, Māyāvin was said to be “the firstborn son of Dúndubhi.”⁷² Between the two tellings, Sugrīva tells Rāma of Vālin’s battle with the *ásura* Dúndubhi (IV.11.7-53). The gigantic *ásura* comes to Kishkíndha in the form of a buffalo with terrifying horns, simply because he is looking for someone to fight. He challenges Vālin from outside the stronghold to engage him in single combat, ridiculing those inside who are asleep or otherwise heedless of the outer world. Vālin leaves his hall, defeats the *ásura* with his hands, and Dúndubhi falls dead to the earth with blood pouring from his ears. When Vālin hurls the dead body, drops of blood fall on the hermitage of a sage, who curses the monkey-king for throwing the corpse. We have repeatedly seen all of these elements: the monstrous outsider who threatens the sleeping stronghold for a somewhat spurious reason, the challenge to single combat, the hero-king’s exit from the hall to battle the monster, the falling to the earth of the enormous opponent, and the problem that the blood from the head of the monster causes for the victor. The weaponless combat also brings to mind Bēowulf’s fight with Grendel, in which the hero foreswears the use of sword and shield and fights only with his grasp (433-440).

Strangely, Sugrīva’s final retelling of the Vālin story conflates the cave-battle and the buffalo-battle. Sugrīva recites an abbreviated version of the cave story, identifying the opponent

⁷¹ Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, 91.

⁷² Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 69 (9.4). *pūrvaḥo Dundubheḥ*.

as Dúndubhi, "a *dánava* [demonic son of the divine female Danu] in the form of a buffalo."⁷³ In this version, the buffalo enters the cave and is followed by Vālin. Sugrīva places "a rock as big as a mountain over the opening of the hole"⁷⁴ and abandons his brother as in the first telling. In the commentary on this book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* known as the *Muktāhāra* (written between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries), it is suggested that Valmiki meant us to understand that both the *ásura* and his buffalo-father were killed by Vālin during the cave episode.⁷⁵ If this somewhat farfetched theory has any validity, it suggests that there may also be a remnant of the parent-and-child "Two-Troll tradition" here, as well.

Given Caesar's account of the slaying of the aurochs in the pit, it is noteworthy that Vālin's enemy is an enormous horned buffalo, and that the rock is placed "over... the hole," perhaps suggesting that Vālin, like the Germanic youth, had entered an opening in the ground to fight his bovine opponent. Frank E. Reynolds has written of a Laotian text "based on the Dúndubhi episode" and its buffalo-killing, "which suggests that this telling of the tale may have served as a correlate or substitute for the buffalo sacrifices that have, in the past, been ubiquitous in Laos."⁷⁶

Following this lead, perhaps there is a connection between the entering of the chthonic enclosure to fight the monster in the mythic material and the entering of the pit to fight the aurochs in the coming-of-age ritual (if such it is) described by Caesar. Stig Wikander and Geo Widengren have discussed the relation of Indo-Iranian dragonslayer myths to "community rituals and cult practices of the warriors' society," suggesting that "ritual dragonslaying may have been associated with initiation into the cult."⁷⁷ In the *Edda*, Thórr is eager to fight Hrungrnir in single combat, since

⁷³ Ibid., 297 (45.3). *dānavaṃ mahiṣākṛtim*.

⁷⁴ Ibid. *śilā parvatasamkāsā biladvāri*.

⁷⁵ Vālmīki, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume IV*, 318-319.

⁷⁶ Reynolds, "Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma Jātaka, and Ramakien," 61.

⁷⁷ Stitt, 37.

no one had ever challenged him to a duel;⁷⁸ this led Dumézil to ask whether the myth referenced the warrior-initiation of Thórr himself.⁷⁹ The *Beowulf* narrator makes a point of stating that Wīglāf's assistance of Bēowulf "was the first time for the young champion that he had to perform the rush of battle with his noble lord."⁸⁰ Wīglāf is not a seasoned veteran come to battle side-by-side with Bēowulf; he is a youth who makes a largely symbolic attack on the dragon before his king and kinsman delivers the final blow. Friedrich Panzer writes that there are "two opposed types of dragon-fighters: the youth who with a victorious dragon-fight opens his hero-career like Sigurd, and the man who ends up in a tragic fight like Thor."⁸¹ The dragon-fight in *Beowulf* contains both Panzer's *Sigurdtypus* and *Thortypus*; the young Wīglāf begins his career (which continues out of the text) as the elderly Bēowulf ends his life in mutual destruction with the dragon (like Thórr and the World Serpent).

Element 5 (Variation 1): Usurpation. *The companion who abandons the hero-king usurps the kingdom.*

After abandoning Vālin and sealing the cave's mouth, Sugrīva returns to Kishkīndha, becomes king, and takes his brother's wife Tārā. Sugrīva tells Rāma that he was "lawfully governing [Vālin's] kingdom"⁸² when his brother returned. Vālin himself sees nothing lawful about Sugrīva's behavior, denounces him as a scheming usurper, and banishes him from the kingdom (IV.10.7-21).

⁷⁸ Snorri, 78.

⁷⁹ Dumézil, 70.

⁸⁰ Fulk, 89 (2616). *wæs forma sīð geongan ceman þæt hē gūðe ræs mid his frēodryhtne fremman sceolde.*

⁸¹ Panzer, *Studien zur Germanischen Sagengeschichte I: Beowulf*, 293. *zwei entgegengesetzte Typen von Drachenkämpfern: den Jüngling, der mit siegreichem Drachenkampf seine Heldenlaufbahn eröffnet wie Sigurd, und den Mann, der sie im tragischen Kampf beschließt wie Thor.* My translation.

⁸² Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 71 (9.21): "rājyaṃ praśāsatas... nyāyato."

Paradoxically, it is the rightful king who is killed by Rāma, and it is the usurper who holds on to the kingdom, the wife, and Rāma's goodwill. While Vālin is "essentially heroic, noble, and magnanimous by nature," Sugrīva is "a rather cowardly, vindictive creature,"⁸³ yet the lesser brother (in terms of both age and character) who abandoned and betrayed the better is the ultimate victor. Sugrīva mentions that his older brother "was always highly regarded by our father and by me as well,"⁸⁴ a parallel to Hrōðgar's comment on his older brother: "he was better than I!"⁸⁵ The similarity of the protestations by the two rulers suggests that perhaps we should consider the Danish king guilty of killing his older brother and usurping his throne, after all.

Element 5 (Variation 2): Appointment. *The companion who assists the hero-king is given the kingdom.*

Wīglāf twice publicly shames the followers of Bēowulf who do not follow their lord into battle with the dragon. In the first instance, before joining Bēowulf, Wīglāf "said many instructions to his companions."⁸⁶ In terms reminiscent of speeches of warriors in the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon poem *The Battle of Maldon*, he speaks of the responsibilities of the system of reciprocal gifting, of paying back the leader with service for the rings, helmets, and swords given in the hall (2633-60), stating that it would not be "proper"⁸⁷ to return home without helping Bēowulf defeat his enemy. After the king's death, Wīglāf faces the "craven traitors"⁸⁸ who had hidden in the woods, reproaching them for abdicating their responsibility of reciprocity for the wealth and war-gear given to them by Bēowulf. His final admonition is that "Death is better for each warrior than

⁸³ Shulman, "Divine Order and Divine Evil in the Tamil Tale of Rama," 654.

⁸⁴ Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four*, 69 (9.1). *pitur bahumato nityaṃ mama c' āpi.*

⁸⁵ Fulk, 18 (469): *sē wæs betera ðonne ic!*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 90 (2631-2). *wordrihta fela sægde gesīðum.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, (2663). *gerysne.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 97 (2847). *tydre trēowlogan.*

a life of disgrace!”⁸⁹ All of this underscores that Wīglāf made the right and proper choice “in their lord’s great need”⁹⁰ – the same situation in which Sugrīva made the wrong decision – and Bēowulf’s young kinsman is rewarded by his king for his action.

The *Rg Veda* offers two early parallels to Wīglāf’s shaming speeches. Speaking to the storm-figures that are his companions, the god Indra chides them for abandoning him during his battle with Vṛtra: “Where was that independent spirit of yours, Maruts, when you left me all alone in the fight with the dragon?”⁹¹ In another hymn, Indra asks the Maruts, “What is this now, you fair-weather friends?!—since you have deserted Indra, who vaunts himself on partnership with you?”⁹² The ever-outspoken Indra shames his companions for abandoning him to fight the dragon alone in a way that Bēowulf never speaks to his followers. In the Anglo-Saxon text, the assisting companion makes the speeches to the others, perhaps to shore up his place as the king’s successor.

The narrator makes clear that it is Wīglāf’s kinship ties to Bēowulf that drive his action. When he first introduces the youth, he writes that “nothing can turn aside ties of kinship for the one who thinks rightly.”⁹³ The dying Bēowulf tells Wīglāf he would have given his war-gear to his son, yet he has no remaining heir (2729-32). Although the text never explicitly states the specific relationship between the two, Kenneth Sisam assumed that Wīglāf is Bēowulf’s nephew, referencing the fact that a storyteller in Hrōðgar’s hall tells Bēowulf the tale of the dragonslayer Sigemund, son of Wæls, and his nephew Fitela⁹⁴ – characters who appear in the Old Norse *Völsunga saga* as Sigmundr, Völsungr, and Sinfjötli. In *Beowulf*, the brief summary of the story

⁸⁹ Ibid., 98 (2890-1). *Dēað bið sēlla eorla gehwylcum þonne edwītliþ!*

⁹⁰ Ibid., 97 (2849). *on hyra mandryhtnes miclan þearfe.*

⁹¹ Doniger, *The Rig Veda*, 168 (I.165.6).

⁹² Jamison and Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India, Volume 2*, 1043 (VIII.7.31).

⁹³ Fulk, 89 (2600-1). *sibb’ æfre ne mæg with onwendan þām ðe wēl þenceð.*

⁹⁴ Sisam, 53.

stresses that the hero Sigemund fights the dragon alone "under hoary stone" without even the aid of his nephew, his closest companion.⁹⁵ Norman E. Eliason argues that, "although the poet is content to leave their relationship obscure," Wīglāf is the son of Bēowulf's sister (a theoretical character never mentioned in the text), as Bēowulf himself is the sister-son of Hygelāc, the king whom Bēowulf himself serves – a fact "which is referred to explicitly and repeatedly."⁹⁶ With Sisam, Eliason argues that the nested telling of the Sigemund-Fitela story is included to provide a mythic context for Bēowulf's own dragon-fight – and to stress his putative sister-son relationship (privileged in ancient Germanic culture) to Wīglāf.⁹⁷ Given the variations of the myth's ending discussed above, it is interesting that *Beowulf* includes two dragonslaying stories, one with the younger kinsman-companion absent (Fitela) and one with the companion present (Wīglāf).

After giving Wīglāf instructions for his own funerary arrangements, the king gives the youth his golden neck-ring ("very likely a royal emblem he had worn about his neck"⁹⁸), helmet, ring (for either finger or arm), and chainmail, telling him that he is the "last remnant of our kin."⁹⁹ For the remainder of the poem, Wīglāf – now referred to as "the hero brave in battle" – gives orders to messengers and commands "heroes," "hall-owners," "leaders of people," and "the king's followers" during the funeral rituals.¹⁰⁰ The young kinsman has now taken the role of the king.

In a mirror-version of Sugrīva's success as unlawful usurper, the end of *Beowulf* makes clear that Wīglāf's reign will not be a happy one. Both a male "sayer of auguries" and a woman "with hair bound up" make grim predictions of the devastating invasions to come under Wīglāf's

⁹⁵ Fulk, 32 (887). *under hārne stān*.

⁹⁶ Eliason, "Beowulf, Wiglaf and the Wægmundings," 95, 97.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁹ Fulk, 96 (2813). *endelāf ūsses cynnes*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-6 (3111-13, 3121). *hæle hildedōr / hæleða / boldāgendra / folcāgende / cyniges þegnas*.

leadership.¹⁰¹ Despite making the right choice in supporting his embattled lord, the young kinsman faces only the destruction of his people. As Śiśupāla says in the *Mahābhārata*, “*dharmā* [right conduct] is subtle.”¹⁰²

Maybe Masson’s idea of the cave as womb may be salvageable. The thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Icelandic *Gísli saga Súrssonar* (*Gisli Sursson’s Saga*) tells of a tenth-century ritual of blood-brotherhood in which a strip of turf is raised from the ground, with both ends still connected to the earth. The arch is held up by a spear, and the participants go under it. Afterwards, they each draw their own blood, let it drip into the space below the arch, and mix the blood and soil together. Finally, they kneel and call on the gods to witness their oaths to avenge each other as if they are brothers.¹⁰³ The ritual presents participants who enter into a womb of earth and emerge reborn in a new, stronger relationship marked by a sign of blood. Both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Beowulf* feature the entering of the chthonic setting in the presence of male companions, both involve blood at the mouth of the entrance as a portentous sign, and both suggest that the abandonment of the hero is not the proper action. Masson was not completely off the mark; he merely misfocused on the cave as a symbol of fatherly fear rather than brotherly rebirth.

Beowulf’s “three chief episodes” (the battles with Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon) “are not repetitions, exactly,”¹⁰⁴ and neither are Sūgrīva’s three tellings of the cave-battle in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Instead, they are attempts to grapple with a fundamental problem that cannot truly be resolved. As Lévi-Strauss writes, “The function of repetition is to render the structure of the myth apparent.”¹⁰⁵ In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it takes three tellings to complete the structure; in

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 103, 107 (3028, 3151). *hwata secggende / bundenheorde*.

¹⁰² Wilmot, *Mahābhārata Book Two: The Great Hall*, 267 (37.3). *dharmāḥ sūkṣmo*.

¹⁰³ Regal, *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, 506.

¹⁰⁴ Ker, *The Dark Ages*, 253.

¹⁰⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 229.

Beowulf, it takes three monsters to complete the form. "The vast symbolism" in *Beowulf*, writes Tolkien, "is near the surface of the exterior narrative, but it does not quite burst through and become allegory."¹⁰⁶ The symbolism of succession may be latent in the battles with Grendel and his mother, but it becomes explicit when Wīglāf joins Bēowulf's battle with the dragon. The young kinsman steps into the story "to set the example of heroic devotion in the Dragon Fight, to comfort [Bēowulf] when he was mortally wounded, listen to his dying speeches, and lead the Geats when he was dead."¹⁰⁷

By symbolically replicating the deeds of the hero-king "a little lower down" in a context with initiatory and man-making associations, the companion takes on some of the glory of the former leader's victories. The chthonic battle of the hero-king and monster and the action of the young companion addresses the problematic issue of succession while evoking elements of warrior-initiation, manhood ritual, and brotherly rebirth. The root question seems to be that of worthiness. The people follow the hero-king who has proven himself a victor on the field of battle. When he dies, why should the untested young kinsman (son or brother) take his place as leader of the community? Lévi-Strauss argues that "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)."¹⁰⁸ Here, we have a question that cannot be satisfactorily answered. In our own time, some of us are still uncomfortable with any political leader whose wealth and status was inherited from the hoard collected by his father's father. We prefer the self-made hero of mythology, whether Indian, English, or American.

¹⁰⁶ Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, 142.

¹⁰⁷ Sisam, 53.

¹⁰⁸ Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 229.

Bibliography

Caesar, Julius. *The Gallic War*. Translated by H. J. Edwards. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917.

Davidson, Hilda Ellis. *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Doniger, Wendy. *The Rig Veda*. London: Penguin, 1981.

Doniger O'Flaherty, Wendy, ed. and trans. *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

Dutt, Manmatha Nath, trans. *The Viṣṇu Mahāpurāṇam*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2005.

Dumézil, Georges. *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*. Edited by Einar Haugen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Eliason, Norman E. "Beowulf, Wiglaf and the Wægmundings." *Anglo-Saxon England* 7 (1978), 95-105.

Fisher, Peter F. "The Trials of the Epic Hero in *Beowulf*." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (June 1958), 171-183.

Fulk, R.D., Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds. *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, Fourth Edition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Grimm, Jacob. *Deutsche Mythologie, Erster Band*. Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1844.

Jamison, Stephanie W. and Joel P. Brereton, trans. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India, Volume II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Ker, W.P. *The Dark Ages*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904.

Kirk, G.S. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

Kittredge, G.L. "Arthur and Gorlagon." *Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* VIII (1903), 150-275.

Krappe, Alexander Haggerty. "Eine mittelalterlich-indische Parallele zum Beowulf." *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* XV (1927), 54-58.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*. Edited by Edmund Leach. London: Tavistock Publications, 1967.

Masson, J. Moussaieff. "Fratricide Among the Monkeys: Psychoanalytic Observations on an Episode in the Vālmīkirāmāyaṇam." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95.4 (October-December 1975), 672-678.

Morey, James H. "The Fates of Men in *Beowulf*." In *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, 26-51. Edited by Charles D. Wright, Frederick M. Biggs, and Thomas N. Hall.

Morson, Gary Saul. *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

Orchard, Andy. *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*. London: Cassell, 1997.

Panzer, Friedrich. *Studien zur Germanischen Sagengeschichte I: Beowulf*. Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1910.

Peter, I.S. *Beowulf and the Rāmāyaṇa: A Study in Epic Poetry*. London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, Ltd., 1934.

Regal, Martin S. *Gisli Sursson's Saga*. In *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, 500-557. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Reynolds, Frank E. "Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma Jātaka, and Ramakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions." In *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Edited by Paula Richman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Shulman, David. "Divine Order and Divine Evil in the Tamil Tale of Rama." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38.4 (August 1979), 651-669.

Sisam, Kenneth. *The Structure of Beowulf*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.

Snorri Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman, 1995.

Stitt, J. Michael Stitt. *Beowulf and the Bear's Son: Epic, Saga, and Fairytale in the Northern Germanic Tradition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.

Swanton, Michael, ed. and trans. *Beowulf*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beowulf and the Critics*. Edited by Michael D.C. Drout. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011.

Turville-Petre, E.O.G. *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

Vālmīki. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume IV*. Translated by Robert P. Goldman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Vālmīki. *Rāmāyaṇa Book One: Boyhood*. Translated by Robert P. Goldman. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Vālmīki. *Rāmāyaṇa Book Two: Ayódhya*. Translated by Sheldon I. Pollock. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

Vālmīki. *Rāmāyaṇa Book Four: Kiṣkindhā*. Translated by Rosalind Lefebber. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Wilmot, Paul, trans. *Mahābhārata. Book Two: The Great Hall*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.