

Chapter 6. Varin's philosophy and the Rök Stone's mythology of death

by Joseph Harris¹

Abstract. The Rök Stone (Östergötland, Sweden, 801-c. 850) bears the longest of all runic inscriptions and one of the most fruitful for our understanding of the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia. While it is true that almost everything about the inscription is controversial, I am confident that my series of recent articles form an adequately secure basis for the interpretation of Rök's mythology and beliefs on the subject of death. The talk will situate Rök among various Germanic mythologies of death more generally, with special attention to the Baldr myth, in particular to the Baldr-figure's slayer, designated a *iatun* in this text. Some effort at wider, extra-Germanic comparisons will be made, centered principally on this demonic figure.

Varin's philosophy and the Rök Stone's mythology of death

The Rök Stone is an important document in the history of Old Swedish and, more generally, of Nordic mythology, as well as of great importance for linguistic purposes. Its inscription, with about 750 runes in a mixture of prose and verse, is the longest of any rune stone. If its accepted date of the first half of the ninth century is correct – and this assessment from the early days of modern runology, has recently been ratified by a thorough contemporary study (Barnes 2007) – then it occupies a crucial position in the development of Nordic, especially Swedish, runic monuments; and it has been studied and fiercely debated for almost a century and a half. Most of the problems of decipherment have long been solved, but there is still room for a good deal of disagreement over aspects of the content and message of the inscription, especially its deeply encrypted third section. In this brief presentation, based on earlier writings by the author as well as on the long tradition of scholarship on the inscription,² I wish to

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² The classics: Bugge 1910, von Friesen 1920, Höfler 1952, Wessén 1958, Lönnroth 1977, Widmark 1992, 1993, 1997, Grønvik 1983, 2003. Recent work: Harris 2006, 2009, forthcoming a, b.

discuss the death philosophy of the raiser of the monument in so far as we can deduce it from the inscription itself and from a few important parallel texts. I will not have recourse to a principled philological argument. That has been done in my earlier papers. What I want to ask here is more general: what did death mean to the ‘author’ of Rök and how did he understand the myth he cites there? The reader is referred to earlier publications for the philological underpinnings and for step-by-step mythological reconstruction.

The structure of the inscription

I begin with a text and translation of the whole inscription. ‘A-E’ refers to faces of the stone; the line numbers 1-28 and the Old Swedish normalization follow Wessén (1958):

Dedication (lines 1-2, side A):

Aft Vamoð standa runar þar. / Æn Varinn faði, faðir aft faigian sunu.

In memory of Vamoð stand these runes. But Varin wrote them, a father in memory of his death-doomed son.

Narrative section one (3-11, A-B; Theoderic section):

First question / hint (3-5): *Sagum mög-minni þat: hværiaR valraubaR vaRin tvaR / þaR, svað tvalf sinnum vaRin numnaR at valraubu, / baðar saman a ymissum mannum?*

I pronounce this hint for the lad: Which were the two war-spoils which, both together, were taken twelve times in booty-taking from different men?

Second question / hint (5-8): *Þat sagum anna/rt: hvaR fur niu aldum an urði fiaru / meðr Hraiðgutum, auk do/miR æn umb sakar?*

This I pronounce as second: Who became without life (died) among the Hreið-Goths nine ages ago, and yet his affairs are still under discussion?

Answer (A9-B11): *Reð ÞjoðrikR hinn þurmoði,*

stilliR/flutna, strandu Hreiðmarar.

SitiR nu garuR a [B] guta sinum,

skialdi umb fatlaðR, skati Mæringa.

Þjoðrik the bold, ruler of sea-warriors, (once) ruled the shore of the Gothic Sea. Now he sits outfitted on his Gothic steed, with his shield buckled on, prince of the Mærings.

Narrative section two (12-19; side C; the twenty kings):

First question / hint (12-14): *Þat sagum tvalfta, hvar hæstr se Gu/nnar etu vettvangi a, kunungaR tvaiR tigiR svað a liggia?*

This I pronounce as twelfth: Where does the steed of Gunn see food on the battle-

field, which twenty kings are lying on?

Second question / hint (14-17): *Þat sagum þrettaunda, hvarir t/vair tigiR kunungaR satin at Siolundi fia/gura vintur at fiagurum namnum, burn/iR fiagurum brøðrum?*

This I pronounce as thirteenth: Which twenty kings sat on Zealand for four winters under four names, sons of four brothers?

Answer (17-19): *ValkaR fim, Raðulfs sy/niR, HraiðulfaR fim, Rugulfs syniR, HaislaR fim, Haruð/s syniR, KynmundaR fim, BernaR synir.*

Five Valki's, sons of Raðulf; five Hraiðulf's, sons of Rugulf; five Haisl's, sons of Haruð; five Kynmund's, sons of Bern.

Line 20 (after Grønvik): *nukmiñimīṛaluṣakiainhuaR[...]ftiRfra*

Narrative section three (according to JH; 21-26, 28, 27; C, D, C top, E):

First question / hint (21-22): *Sagum mǫg-minni þat: hvaR Inguld/inga vaRi guldinn at kvanaR husli?*

I pronounce this hint for the lad: Who among the descendants of Ing-Vald was compensated for through the sacrifice of a woman?

Second question / hint (23-24): *Sagum mǫg-minni: [h]vaim se burinn nið/R draengi?*

I pronounce a (further) hint for the lad: To whom was a son born for a gallant young man?

Answer (24-26, 28, 27): *Vilinn es þat + knua knatt/i iatun. Vilinn es þat + nyti. / Sagum mǫg-minni: Þor /ol niRøðR / sefi via vari.*

Vilinn it is, whom the enemy slew. Vilinn it is: may he enjoy (this monument). I pronounce a (final?) hint for the lad: At ninety, the Kinsman, respecter of shrines, engendered Thor.

The inscription is comprised of a dedication and three more or less narrative sections, each composed of two questions or hinting questions and an answer. Line 20 at one edge of side C has sustained extensive damage, and its reconstruction is a problem of its own (Harris forthcoming a). Like several of my predecessors who have closely studied Rök, I believe it to be a frame (like the dedication) that introduces Section Three.

As a whole, each section's questions and their answer evoke a story-complex. Both the structure and the content are clearest in Section One, which deals with the famous figure of Theodoric the Great (the Dietrich von Bern of high medieval German epic) in an early form of his life in heroic legend. All three sections treat material that can be interpreted thematically as concerned with life and death, especially with the persistence of life in the face of death. Theodoric died nine generations ago among his Goths; yet his deeds are still debated in the present of the inscription, and in the form of his equestrian statue in Aachen, he still sits armed and ready for battle. The twenty kings of Section Two seem to have been members of a war-band / trading company, a classic *Männerbund* that lives on institutionally after the deaths of individuals. Section Three features a promising man struck down at an early age and how his death was compensated for within the family by the birth of a (half) brother.

Themes of life and death

Thus death is central to all three sections, but in different ways all three also show how life goes on in some form. In the Theodoric section, the heroic individual survives through his reputation, something like the *kleos aphithon* or *dómr* that dies never, though this famous Indo-European and Germanic theme is more interestingly nuanced in Rök. The twenty kings share names and ‘fathers’ (probably the initiatory-leader figures attested in *Männerbünde* around the world); and if my interpretation is right, the idea of survival here is a corporate one: the individual is subsumed into a group of ‘brothers,’ which cannot ‘die’ since its form of ‘life’ exists on a different plain from that of the heroic individual. Section Three combines elements of the individual (as in Section One) and of the group (as in the pseudo-family of Section Two). Here the group is that of blood relations, the family. The head of the clan of the Ing-Valdings is represented by the pious ninety-year old ‘Kinsman,’ who sires a replacement for his fallen son. The on-going ‘life’ of Section Three is therefore partly individual and partly corporate or institutional.

I have further argued that the three stories or narrative complexes together comprise a sort of argument, a Levi-Straussian form of native philosophy through stories that are ‘good to think with.’ Certainly the inscription as I interpret it yields to this Hegelian formal postulate almost too easily, and of course I worry that the form I see is a product of my reading, my expectations, rather than inherent in the material – the inscription itself being, of course, the only ultimate key to the mode of thought of the makers and audiences of the stone. But the obliqueness of the problem statement on the stone (detailed below), its divergence from a simplified Lévi-Straussian paradigm, is a factor that speaks in favor of this interpretation. For, although life and death are featured as the red threads of the narrative material in all three sections, the simple binary opposition we might expect – say, raw vs. cooked – does not emerge as the ‘problem.’ Nor does the mediation generate reduced restatements of the binary (in principle going on until the impulse is exhausted) as in a truly Levi-Straussian myth complex. Instead mediation on Rök produces a single final myth satisfying within itself, I believe, the problem posed by the juxtaposition of the two preceding stories. The limitation of the Rök inscription to three story-complexes and a single opposition-through-mediation movement may make it unsuitable as evidence that the story in Section Three somehow embodies a whole society’s ultimate solution to the philosophical ‘problem.’ But we seem at least justified in treating the inscription as one man’s, Varin’s, thought process and solution – that is, in treating him as its ‘author.’

I submit that the author and audience accept both life and death in their coexistence. They would regard the following two statements as equally true and interchangeable: ‘Death comes and goes even as life persists’ and ‘life comes and goes while death persists.’ I suggest that to us the former seems to be optimistic, redolent of fertility and affirmation, while the latter focuses on negation and annihilation. In any case, the ‘problem’ set by the three sections is not life *against* death but the contexts of life *and* of death: the individual in its strongest form (the hero, the singular

master of plural masses) is opposed to the group in a very strong form (the all-male ‘family’ of warriors / traders, where the plural engulfs and contains traces of the singular), and the mediation product of this binary is a form of life-and-death (that is, of human existence) in which both the singular individual and the plural matrix of like-blooded persons receive equal value. In other words – and anticipating in modern terms our conclusion – the DNA-community is the form of group immortality in which the individual finds its optimal realization. But we will be in a better position to justify this mode of mediated individual immortality after discussing the myth in Section Three.

The first two narrative sections deal with heroic material like that of Germanic heroic and eulogistic poetry found in West Germanic sources and elsewhere in North Germanic. While every aspect of Rök has been furiously debated, one can safely say that Sections One and Two are less contentious than Section Three and that they contrast with Three in being drawn from the heroic, that is secular human, world. They also contrast with Section Three in having item numbers attached to them, as if they represented selections from the same itemized repertoire of heroic lore, while Section Three comprises unnumbered mythic material and is drawn from a different store. Other Norse sources, notably the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*, but also the Gotland picture stones and several mythic-heroic sagas, evince a similar juxtapositioning of heroic and mythic narrative even while maintaining the distinction between human actions and sacred story. Thematically, however, all three sections make literary sense both individually and in juxtaposition, and it will come as no surprise that death-and-life might be an appealing unifying subject in Rök’s attempt at a discursive funeral or memorial inscription as a whole. The author Varin finds heroic stories no less apt for ‘thinking with’ than myth, but the sacred story is saved to the last and deployed, it seems, to clinch a kind of argument.

The dedicatory lines tell us unambiguously that the stone was raised and the runes cut by Varin, a father in memory of his ‘death-doomed’ (ON *feigr*) son Vamoð. The body of the inscription in its three narrative sections is a small anthology of heroic-mythic stories or *minni* produced for Varin’s *mǫgr* ‘descendant,’ an emotion-laden word found in early poetry and at least once in an earlier funeral inscription. The stories, however, could not be related in detail on stone. Instead, they are *evoked* by hinting questions and brief answers in a version of a skaldic routine or game known as *greppa-minni*; cf. *mǫg-minni*. Vamoð may have been very young (*mǫgr* also means ‘boy’); and the playful routine may be evoking some favorite tales as a kind of gift of story for the dead. But the thematic connections and sense of the whole seem serious and religious in a sense deeper than cult. I will return to the meaning of the whole after discussion of the more difficult mythic material of the cipher section.

The myth in Section Three

Like the other sections, Section Three cannot really ‘narrate’ its myth according to our

understanding of narration, confined as it is within the parameters of the available stone surfaces and by the medium of runes and ciphers. In Sweden of the early ninth century, real narration would have been a feature only of the oral medium, the voice, and one of the mysteries associated with the Rök stone is precisely Varin's precocious attempt at literature in a preliterate environment (*cf.* Harris 2009 and forthcoming b). Despite the 'refraction' of the narrative, however, the hints supplied by the section's questions and answer do give the modern myth-reconstructor enough to go on. From the first question (ll. 21-22) we learn that the tragedy-with-redemption that we are about to hear of (in our mind's ear) takes place within a certain clan, the Inguldings, reconstructed as descendants of a founder figure or patriarch, Ing-Vald. To ask who was compensated for implies a death, the only important moment for compensation in such stories. Compensation can be *wergild* or revenge, but the subsequent events do not deal directly with either; instead the birth of a new son seems to be itself the compensation for the death of his brother. And that form of compensation is commensurate with the involvement of a woman in the story (ll. 21-22); it also agrees with an ancient form of compensation alluded to in a famous Icelandic poem of 961, Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek* (st. 17), and also in an analogue of the *Sonatorrek* passage in the Old English epic *Beowulf*.³

The second question (ll. 23-24) is predicated upon the death alluded to in the first, but asks to whom, to what father, an heir was born in the place of a gallant young man (*drængi*). These shards come together into a fairly coherent mosaic: a young man (*drængr*) of the Inguldung clan was killed; the compensation for him came in the form of the birth of a new son to the father of the *drængr*, a descendant (*niðr*) who will take the place of the dead. The answer section contributes some of the names, in direct answer to the question form of the hints: the dead youth is Vilin; the father is not named but called by a title, 'shrine-respecting Kinsman,' and characterized as ninety years of age at the time of the birth; the newborn son is named Thor. The name of the god Thor of course puts the story into the realm of myth if we had doubted it before; but the structure and content of the story, as defined by the basic actions and actors – grieving father, dead youth, newborn heir, and a mother and a slayer yet to be discussed – are obviously sufficient to raise the possibility that we are dealing with a version of the myth of the death of Baldr so well known from later West Scandinavian texts. There Odin is the grieving father, Baldr the early-dead son, and Váli or Bous the newborn brother.

The hypothesis that Vilin's death and the compensatory birth of Thor represents an East Scandinavian variant, attested several centuries before the familiar western variants, provides a precise explanation for the role of the woman in Question One, where the compensation for the dead youth of the Inguldings is said to take place *at kvanaR husli* 'through the sacrifice of a woman.' In the Baldr story, both in the Icelandic forms and in the Danish form reported in Saxo Grammaticus, it was foretold or fated that revenge for Baldr could only be brought about by a child sired upon the

³ *Beowulf* and *Sonatorrek* cited from 'Primary works' in Bibliography; Harris 1994, 1999.

maiden Rinda / Rindr.⁴ Odin carried out this deed through magic or trickery (depending on the sources). So the ‘sacrifice’ of a woman refers to the fate-sanctioned rape of Rinda / Rindr or else an East Scandinavian stand-in for her. Probably the name of the ‘woman’ in the Swedish version on Rök was **Vrind-*, the etymologically correct eastern form, because in East Gautland, not too far from Rök, there was a farm name which place-name scholars had taken back to the form **Vrindar-vé* ‘Rind’s sanctuary,’ adding good and independent evidence to the worship of this chthonic figure, probably a close analogue of Jǫrð, the earth goddess / giantess on whom Odin fathered Thor in the western genealogical myths.

Other evidence supporting the identification of Rök’s myth as an early East Scandinavian variant of Baldr’s death may be briefly mentioned. Odin is presented in western sources as very old, and his unnamed analogue on Rök is ‘ninety’ when he begets the replacement son Thor. This part of the sacred mystery is embedded in a complex rhetorical, runic, and graphic schema (ll. 26, 28, 27), but even in the abbreviated form of this essay we can appreciate the way the most sacred title and subject of the concluding sentence of the inscription are saved for the top face of the stone, some two-and-a-half meters above the earth and normally visible to the gods only. The actual name of Odin is avoided here, as frequently (he had a large number of aliases), by the use of a term that emphasizes the family context (*sefi* ‘Kinsman’) and in that context his piety toward the shrines (*vari via*). Rök’s myth bestows the name Thor on the newborn brother. The variance from the ‘standard’ version of the Baldr myth is not as great as it might appear: Thor is everywhere called Odin’s son; his mother is an earth goddess / giantess who is frequently mentioned together with Rind; Thor’s son Magni, also born of a giantess, is, like Váli, a precocious baby. In the modern reception the Baldr myth is strongly characterized, not by narrative structure or *dramatis personae* – the tools I have used to reconstruct the myth – but by the name of Baldr (which may be a title rather than a name); so it is perhaps psychologically difficult to accept as a version of the well-known myth a narrative in which the otherwise unknown Vilin occupies Baldr’s slot. But it is not difficult to relate the name *Vilinn* to the sphere of Odin or to construct arguments for its plausible application to the Baldr figure. I believe it is more important to emphasize, however, that Vilin’s story was in runes as much as four centuries before the Baldr figure emerges in writing and that a great deal of variation must have taken place in cults and in myths, for which there was never a standard until the thirteenth-century Christian writers of Iceland and Denmark canonized the narrative forms known to them.

Still, the myth in Section Three may be only distantly related to the Baldr myth, so that scholarship should retain the possibility of treating it separately. The contrasting figure of the last of the *dramatis personae*, the slayer, may lead in that direction. The Rök inscription attributes Vilin’s death to *iatun*. This word is certainly an early form, the earliest in writing, of the later ON *jǫtunn* and cognate with OE *eo-ten*, and in the later Old Norse texts a *jǫtunn* was a ‘giant.’ I believe, however, that we

⁴ Saxo cited from ‘Primary works’ in Bibliography.

would do well to remember how early this Rök *iatun* is and to try to separate it in our minds from the modern image – also from nineteenth-century folklore and from the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sagas, where the majority of *jǫtnar* appear – of the big goofy and largely comical figures we call giants. In Anglo-Saxon, *eoten* covers ‘giant, monster, enemy’ (Clark Hall and Meritt: 1962, s.v.), and the chief *eoten* of English texts, Grendel, is surely more monster than folklore giant. For Varin’s philosophy of death and the early mythology it is based on, we need a more profound view of the *iatun*. But first we must examine, even if briefly and inconclusively, the implications of *iatun* in the Vilin / Baldr narrative.

The western versions of Baldr’s death offer three different patterns: those of verse, of Saxo, and of Snorri. Verse passages (which are generally regarded as older than the thirteenth-century prose authors) alluding to the killing of Baldr name the lone slayer ‘Hǫðr’ and say he is Baldr’s brother. Saxo also has a Høtherus who acts alone but is not related to Balderus. Snorri alone has the famously complicated plot whereby Loki, who is a *jǫtunn*, is the ‘intellectual author’ of Baldr’s slaying, which is carried out by a blind Hǫðr (presumably Baldr’s brother).⁵ A Swedish (Gautish) heroicized version of the story is found in *Beowulf* according to which Here-beald (the Baldr figure) is ‘accidentally’ slain by his brother Hæð-cyn (Hǫðr). Probably the single slayer and brother motifs are more original than Snorri’s wonderfully complex story and Saxo’s confused one; one scholar, for example, puts Loki’s entry into the Baldr myth as late as the eleventh century. Now, the Rök narrative has in the slayer slot a single figure, not explicitly blind or explicitly related to the victim or explicitly acting by accident, and characterized only by the word *iatun*. This could be simply a name, a nickname, or a prejudicial epithet; or it could be a species label. The later involvement of the *jǫtunn* Loki in the west argues for the last of these possibilities; but even if we wished to favor one of the first three possibilities in order more smoothly to integrate the Rök myth into the Baldr complex, we would have to face the implications of *iatun* for any attempt to understand Varin’s thought. In other words, whether in the Rök story a human or divine brother of Vilin is *branded* an *iatun* or whether the unrelated slayer actually belongs to that non-human, non-god race, *iatun* might be crucial to Varin’s death philosophy.

In the earliest layer of Norse mythological sources, *jǫtnar* sometimes seem, Titan-like, to be an older race of gods; sometimes ‘monster’ fits better than ‘giant’ to describe them. Loki’s three monstrous children are *jǫtnar*: Fenrir, the wolf who will defeat and swallow Odin at the cosmic battle of Ragnarök; the Midgarðsormr, the sea-serpent who encircles the lands of the earth and will kill Thor when Ragnarök comes; and Hel, the ghastly half-black, half-white mistress of the lands of the dead. Another animal-monster of the final battle is the hellhound Garmr, nemesis, according to Snorri, of the god Týr. In the mythology the term *jǫtnar* also covers a wide variety of more or less humanoid figures, all being united by their structural opposition to the

⁵ Gade 2006 argues that Snorri may not have known that Hǫðr was Baldr’s brother. The case is well argued, but unconvincing considering the verse testimony. Hǫðr’s blindness may be a motif borrowed by Snorri from Christian sources: O’Donoghue 2003.

gods, but also closely integrated with the community of gods. One could almost define the *jǫtunn* of Norse myth not by size or body type, but by its relationship to the society of the gods – a relationship that includes, but is not limited to, hostility. But surveys of the use of the term *jǫtnar* in the ever-later literary forms probably give less insight into Rök’s *iatun* than the etymologies of some of the probably early mythological *jǫtnar*. Hræsvelgr (‘corpse-gulper’) is an eagle, perhaps mythologized from the carrion-eating ‘beasts of battle,’ but not the only corpse-eating *jǫtunn*. The serpent Níðhöggr (‘hate-striker’) sucks corpses, and wolves tear men, perhaps near ‘Corpse Strand’ (Náströnd). In Egill Skallagrímsson’s *Hǫfuðlausn* (about 936), the poet pictures the ‘goddess’ of the dead, Hel, as a carrion crow standing upon the battlefield-dead;⁶ and Hel is, I believe, of importance in understanding the early conception of *iatun*.

The word *hel*, all commentators agree, is from a root meaning ‘hide, cover, enwrap’ (e.g., OE, OS, OHG *helan* ‘conceal’); the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **kel-* gives words like *conceal* and Gk. *kalypso*. Originally *hel* was where the dead are ‘hidden, covered, enwrapped,’ the grave, especially the communal burial place of the stone age. The ‘goddess,’ or rather *iatun*, Hel is generally thought to be a personification based on the place *hel*. The word family is very large in Germanic alone, and *hel* the place is attested in every Germanic language. But the person or demon Hel may also be old. Hermann Güntert, in his famous 1919 book *Kalypso*, explores especially this PIE word family and at one point argues that the ‘goddess’ is ‘pre-Indo-European’ in the sense that the name and function are shared with Uralic (here = Finno-Ugric), which had a chthonic death-goddess *Koljo* (< PIE **koljo-*; cf. *hel* < PGmc **halja-* < PIE **koljo-* [Güntert 1919: 52-53]). Despite the fact that the ‘goddess’ Hel is not attested in Old English or the other older Germanic languages except Old Norse, the Finno-Ugric connection convinces Güntert that she was ‘an ancient, Common Germanic demon – a demon [...] not a personally formed goddess!’⁷ Hel seems, then, etymologically to be a demon who ‘covers, hides, conceals’ the corpses of the dead, but Güntert frequently refers to her with a different vocabulary: ‘a corpse-demon that eats men ... [I]n the caves and tombs in which the dead were sunk, crouches the greedy, corpse-demon who gulps down all human bodies.’⁸ This language implicitly identifies the ‘concealing’ she-demon with one that actively (‘gierig’) lusts to consume its victims; with this language Güntert seems to have in mind the wolf and hound associated with death, finding especially in Garmr ‘the ancient conception of the corpse-eater, the animalistic, greedy, gulping death-demon

⁶ In ‘Primary works’: *Skjaldedigting* BI: 32: *trað nipt Nara / náttverð ara* ‘the kinswoman of Nari (Loki)(>Hel) trod the dinner of eagles (corpses)’ (*Hǫfuðlausn*, st. 10).

⁷ Güntert 1919: 39: ‘eine uralte, gemeingermanische Dämonin – eine Dämonin [...] nicht eine persönlich gestaltete Göttin!’ Modern opinion is divided on this particular Germanic-Finno-Ugric relationship: Klystra *et al.* 1991-96, II: 105.

⁸ Güntert 1919: 40, 39: ‘[die] menschenverschlingende[] Leichendämonin, wie ich sie für gemeingermanisch und vorgermanisch halte’; ‘in den Höhlen und Grüften, in welche die Toten gesenkt werden, haust die gierige, alle Menschenleiber verschlingende Leichendämonin....’

that lies at the basis of the ‘four-eyed hound’ of the ancient Indic peoples, the two hellhounds of the Avesta ... and the *Kerberos* of the Greeks.’⁹ Güntert goes on to make what he calls ‘eine Proportion’ – a proportional formula – out of the relationship of the goddess and the hellhound such that:

The figures of gods and demons, which originated on the basis of similar conceptions, appear in the language of myth as blood relatives:

*Hel : Fenrisulfr, Garmr = Hekate, Hekabe : Kerberos.*¹⁰

The etymologies of *Fenrir* and *Garmr* offer no help in conceptualizing death; but all these creatures are *jǫtnar*, and this word has a rich and widely agreed etymology that leads back into the sphere of Hel’s corpse-gulping canine kin. The source, PGmc **etuna-* (< PIE **eduno-*), is derived from the verb **etan-* ‘to eat,’ carrying a basic meaning ‘eater,’ further glossed by the etymologists to their own taste as ‘glutton’ (with the folklore giant in mind) or ‘corpse-devourer’ (roughly in Güntert’s sense).¹¹ If Fin. *etona*, *etana* is a borrowing from Germanic, its sense ‘snail, worm; evil person’ may be a reflection of original devouring death. Later Danish and Swedish forms with *-tt-* (*jætte*, *jätte*) will have derived from forms in the paradigm which (before the first consonant shift) had the geminating combination *-dn-*. In addition to the *-n-* derivatives (*iatun*, *jätte*, etc.), there are *-l-* derivatives such as NNorw. *jǫtul* ‘giant.’ As for the secular meaning ‘glutton,’ preferred by, for example, Hellquist (1967: s.v.), it seems unlikely that such an early mythological term would have taken its name merely from human gluttony or from its projection onto the appetite of ‘giants’ such as we encounter in the comical forms of folktales; and even if ‘big eater’ were the original meaning of the form, an early religious-mythological context would in any case have lent a pregnant significance. Finally, very recent linguistic work by Michael Janda throws further light on the derivation of PGmc **etuna-*. In the context of working out the derivation of *Varuṇa*, Janda set up a parallel with our word (I will not attempt to recount the parallel here), which shares a rare derivational suffix and chain of development (Janda 2000: 110-112). It would appear, then, that the old Germanic word **etuna-*, perhaps originally designating a demon who consumes (the dead), is constructed according to a pattern rare in Germanic and paralleled by one of the most original Indic gods, a god also associated with the dead and one who hap-

⁹ Güntert 1919: 41: ‘Mit diesem *Garmr* aber haben wir einen Beleg für die uralte Vorstellung vom Leichenfresser genannt, vom tierisch, gierig schlingenden Todesdämon, wie er gemeinsam dem ‘vieräugigen Hund’ der alten Inder, den beiden Höllenhunden des Awesta ... und dem *Kerberos* der Griechen zugrunde liegt.’

¹⁰ Güntert 1919: 41: ‘Gottesgestalten und Dämonen, die auf Grund ähnlicher Vorstellungen entstanden waren, erscheinen in der Sprache des Mythos als leibliche Verwandte ...: *Hel : Fenrisulfr, Garmr = Hekate, Hekabe : Kerberos.*’

¹¹ A somewhat less controversial derivation from pre-Germanic; pro: Karsten 1943: 82-83 and his earlier work; contra: Collinder 1932-34: 188-190 and earlier. A modern balance is drawn by Klystra *et al.* 1991-96, I: 57.

pens to share a semantic range with the Germanic *Hel* since Janda finally glosses *Varuṇa* as ‘the god with the covering, wrapping.’¹²

Varin’s philosophy of death

I have argued that the constellation of heroic story material and myth on the Rök stone constitutes a kind of reasoning process about life and death and that the ideas derivable from the inscription are attributable to Varin, the bereaved father and sponsor of the stone. I further believe that Varin’s philosophy of death was based on or at least included his local variant of the myth we are more familiar with as attached to Baldr. Scholars of Nordic paganism, notably Jan de Vries, see Baldr’s death as the First Death and the mythologem as a whole as dealing with the problem of death (de Vries 1956-57, II: 237-238). The hermeneutical ‘fit’ between Rök’s Section Three and the western Baldr myth must remain on several levels hypothetical; but if my philological work and basic myth reconstruction are convincing, interpretations of the Baldr myth can at least help in the effort to understand Varin.

Varin may then have felt that he had honored his predeceased son with a collection of stories that affirmed, if not life out of death, at least an equal balance of life with death and that in the Vilin myth he had supplied a deeply sacred story that clinched a theological argument. The first line of the inscription describes Vamoð as ‘death-doomed,’ which may mean that he died young; and in relation to Varin, of course he did. If so, neither the immortality of ‘imperishable fame’ exemplified in the Theodoric of Section One, the heroic hope common to the Indo-Europeans generally, nor the immortality of the sodality, the *Männerbund* of Section Two, will have had the full force of analogy as applied to Vamoð. But Section Three, with the myth of regeneration within the bloodline provided Varin’s consolation. Varin seems to have been positively guided by the idea expressed negatively in *Sonatorrek*, st. 17: ‘This is also said that no one may get recompense for a son unless he himself begets again the descendant who will be a man born for the other one, in the place of his brother.’¹³ Though Egill Skallagrímsson and the Old Man of *Beowulf*, ll. 2444-62, both considered this bit of ancient wisdom as inapplicable to themselves, Varin, by bringing to bear the Vilin myth, seems to accept it as his hope. It is unclear in the maxim and in Rök’s question / hint *hvaim se burinn niðr drængi* (‘to whom was a son born for a gallant young man?’) whether the newborn son will simply replace the deceased or will actually replicate him, whether we are dealing with dedication to a specific role or position within the family or with rebirth. Rebirth is of course (before cloning) a purely illogical and therefore eminently religious idea; it has been rather extensively discussed in relation to early Germanic beliefs.¹⁴ Dedication is perhaps a rationalizing

¹² Janda 2000: 111: ‘der (Gott) mit der Umhüllung.’

¹³ Translation mine; cf. Harris 1994.

¹⁴ See especially Eckhardt 1937, de Vries 1956-57, I: 94-95, 180-183, 217-218, and Harris 1994.

development from the religious idea; in any case, dedication is exactly what we meet in the western variants of the Baldr myth, except that there the dedication is not precisely (or not only) a matter of replacement, but rather a dedication to revenge. Varin seems to emphasize the positive regeneration of the family through individual replacement rather than the negative compensation of revenge; but we cannot exclude the possibility that the myth complex that constituted Varin's tools for philosophizing also included revenge.

It is impossible to overlook the relationship of homology between Varin's own 'story' and the story he chose for Section Three. Varin parallels the *sefi via vari* as bereaved father while Vamoð mirrors Vilin as the early dead promising youth (*drængr*). It follows that Varin's consolation is the hope that the mythic solution will somehow govern his future too. The parallel relationship between Varin and the myth he had inscribed on Rök is underlined by the alliterative continuity from the real-life father and son at least to the dead *drængr* of the myth, Vilin; and if my complex speculations linking *sefi via vari* to *Inguldinga* (from a founder **Ing(i)-Vald-r/i?*) and both to Odin can be trusted, then the aged father in the myth may also have had *v*-alliteration in his avoided name. In any case, the *sefi* 'Kinsman' in Rök's myth seems to play the role of Odin in the western analogue. I will take this extremely speculative line of thought one stage further and wonder whether the alliterative signal of the family relationships could have been established before initial *w*- was lost or became *v*- or while it was still remembered that *Óðinn* had once been pronounced **Wōðenn*. The *w*-series might thus have included: *Varinn* < **war-ana-z*; *Vámóðr* < **waiha-mōða-z*; *Vilinn* < **wil-ana-z*; and the unnamed **wōð-ana-z*. Loss of initial *w*- before vowels like *ō* is dated c. 650-800 by Noreen (1923: 169). If the alliterative link is to be trusted (with or without Odin and/or Vald), Varin may have seen his family as somehow part of the Inguldings, perhaps conceived as his mythic forefathers.

Another link between the human family of Varin and Vamoð and the Inguldings of the Vilin / Baldr myth can probably be extracted from the word *faigian* 'death-doomed,' chosen by Varin as the only characterization of his son on the entire monument. All we really know about Vamoð is that he was 'fated' and in fact died. Baldr is similarly fated, and the only real story told of him centers on his death. Of course, Snorri fleshes out Baldr's character: he is beloved and beautiful; his parents and his wife are accounted for; his 'judgments' are mentioned; and the circumstances of his death, the attempt to save him, and his funeral are all recounted. But the actual deeds of the living Baldr are limited to receiving ominous dreams, standing as a target, and dying; one might add as actions from the world of the dead that Baldr sends a ring back to his father and after Ragnarök will return with the younger gods to start a new aeon, but in effect Baldr is not an 'action hero' but a passive member of the dead around whom fears accumulate. The fate theme in Baldr's life begins when he discovers through dreams that he is to die;¹⁵ although the word ON *feigr* 'doomed' is not used of Baldr in surviving texts, it precisely describes his nature. Through this word,

¹⁵ In 'Primary works': *Gylfaginning*, chap. 49; *Poetic Edda* (*Baldrs draumar*).

augmented by the homology of structural situation and perhaps by a special relationship to the family of Vilin, Varin has set up a paradigmatic relationship between the two honored dead and the two bereaved families. This is precisely the kind of relationship between *homo religiosus* and his gods in the famous theory of Mircea Eliade (1959): divine acts *in illo tempore* constitute a paradigm for the life of the believer. Rök furnishes relatively scanty evidence of paradigmatic grief compared to the *Sonatorrek* of Egill Skallagrímsson, another bereaved father, who, I have argued, viewed his situation through the lens of the Baldr tragedy, as Eliade’s theory would have predicted. And the presence of allusions to Baldr’s death in other Norse funeral poems (Harris 1999) suggests that Snorri’s characterization of Baldr as *gráta guð* ‘god of lamentations’ uses the word *grátr* in a semi-technical sense as ‘(a poem of) lamentation.’¹⁶

We must close without solving the puzzle of Varin’s final understanding of death itself. Did *iatun* still carry in Varin’s day the baggage of its ancient associations? Was the monster *iatun* a personification? Or had the hostile ‘giant’ of later times already established itself, to be realized in the Vilin myth as either an epithet or an anticipation of Loki? We can be certain that, however terrible its monstrous representation, death was balanced in Varin’s imagination by the life of the clan: man did not face death as an individual, but life-and-death as part of a blood family, clan, or what we might now call a DNA pool.

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¹⁶ In ‘Primary works’: *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 17; also Helgason 1944; Harris 2000.

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**Part III. Mythological continuities
between Africa and other
continents**

