

Philological Society Early Career Researcher Forum  
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**Baldr's Love and Death in the Light of Indo-European Studies:  
Old Norse *Nanna Nepsdóttir* 'Maiden Sky-Daughter' and *Hǫðr* 'Darkness'**  
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**A. The myth of Baldr's love for Nanna and death at the hands of Loki and Hǫðr**

Main sources: *Völuspá* (31–3), *Baldrs draumar* (passim); *Lokasenna* (27–8); *Gylfaginning* (49).<sup>1</sup>

**1. Current etymology**

*Nanna*: ON *nanna* 'maiden, woman' (Liberman 2004:25; 47), originally a *Lallwort* (Henning 1908:478–9; de Vries 1962, s.v.) or reflex of \**nanb-ō-* 'brave' (Vries 1956–7:II,222–3).

*Nepsdóttir*: 'daughter of Nepr/Nefr'; gen. sg. *Neps*, nom. sg. *Nepr* or *Nefr* (both attested, cf. Lind 1905–15), etymologically unclear (de Vries 1962, s.v.).

*Hǫðr*: derivative of ON f. subst. *hǫð* 'battle' (mostly in PNs, *Hǫð-broddr*), reflex of PGmc \**habu-* 'id.' (OE *Heaðo*) and PIE \**kó/á/Htu-* 'hostility' (Hitt. *kattu-* 'id.', OIr. *cath* 'battle') BUT the semantics find no support in the texts.

**2. Proposal**

Data from comparative historical linguistics and poetics, both from a Germanic and an IE perspective: new formal analyses and semantic interpretations for *Nanna*, *Nepsdóttir*, and *Hǫðr*.

The proposed interpretations find further support in comparative IE mythology.

**B1. ON *Nanna Nepsdóttir***

**1. *Nanna***

**Formation**: identical to ON *nanna* 'maiden, woman', *Lallwort* (cf. Dial. Sw. *nanna* 'mother', Lat. *nonna*, It. *mamma*).

**Semantics**: from a synchronic perspective, clearly means 'maiden', cf. *Vsp*. 30<sup>9–12</sup>.

**Phraseology**: Nanna characterized as *virgo* 'maiden' and *puella* 'id.' in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*.

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive review of the scholarship on Baldr, cf. Liberman 2016:197–260.

## 2. *Neps-dóttir* and *Nefr*

Nanna only Norse goddess consistently referred to with both name and patronymic *Nepsdóttir*.

**Phonology:** gen. sg. ON *Neps<sup>o</sup>*, nom. sg. *Nefr* or *Nepr*? Originally *Nefr*:

ON *Nepr* analogical levelling from *Nefr*, gen. sg. *Neps<sup>o</sup>* < \**Nefs* (frequently ON *-fs-* > *-ps-*, cf. ON *repsing* < *refsing* ‘punishment’ : *refsa* ‘to punish’, cf. OE *refsan*, OHG *refsen*).

Gen. sg. \**Nefs<sup>o</sup>* outcome of \**Nefrs<sup>o</sup>* (with loss of *-r* in context *-CrC(-)*), Noreen 1923:214–5; cf. ON gen. sg. *myrks* [*Gylf.* 45] < *myrkrs*, gen. sg. of *myrkr* ‘darkness’).

ON *Nefr*, gen. sg. \**Nefrs* reflex of a proto-form \**nebir-a-*.

**Formation:** *Neps-dóttir* regular ON patronymic formation, type [FATHER<sub>gen.</sub>]° *dóttir* ‘daughter of X’.

**2<sup>nd</sup> element:** *dóttir* ‘daughter’ : PGmc \**duhter-* (PIE \**d<sup>h</sup>ugh<sub>2</sub>tér-* : θυγάτηρ, Ved. *duhitár-*, Lith. *duktē*)

**1<sup>st</sup> element:** ON *Nefr* (\**nebir-a-*) expected<sup>2</sup> reflex of PGmc \**neb-iz-* and PIE \**néb<sup>h</sup>-es-* ‘sky, cloud’.

## 3. Indo-European parallels

(1) **Greek:** Κόρη ‘Maiden’ Διὸς θυγάτηρ ‘daughter of Zeus (\*Sky)’

(2) **Vedic:** Dawn *kanā-* ‘maiden’ *divó duhitár-* ‘Sky’s daughter’

(3) **Lithuanian:** the Sun *Diēvo duktē/dukrýtē* ‘daughter of Diēvas (\*Sky-god)’

To sum up: *Nanna Nepsdóttir* ‘Maiden Sky-daughter’ reflex of formulaic epithets of PIE dawn-goddess, with parallels in Gk Κόρη Διὸς θυγάτηρ, Ved. *kanā-* *divó duhitár-*, Lith. *diēvo duktē*.

## B2. ON *Hǫðr*

### 1. Proposal

**Phonology:** expected outcome of PGmc \**hab-u*- and PIE \**kót-u*-.

**Formation:** generalized strong stem of acrostatic noun PIE \**kót-u-/két-u-*. Inherited formation: suffix *-u-* not productive in PGmc (Bammesberger 1990:154ff).

**Derivational basis:** PIE root \*(*s*)*ket-* ‘conceal’ (cf. *LIV*<sup>3</sup>:357; *EWAia*, s.v. *CAT*; Jamison 1983:113–4).<sup>3</sup>

**Semantics:** (a) ‘concealment’ (abstract meaning), expected for this formation; (b) ‘shadow, darkness’ (concrete), reconstructed on the basis of Goth., OE, Gk, OIr.

<sup>2</sup> With regular thematization, cf. ON *setr* ‘seat’ < \**setir-a-* ← PGmc \**set-iz-* < PIE \**séd-es-* ‘id.’.

<sup>3</sup> The root is reconstructed as \**k<sup>(h)</sup>et-* ‘entweichen’ in *LIV*<sup>3</sup>:357, which exclusively takes into account Ved. *cátant-* and *cáताया-*<sup>4</sup>; the pure velar \**k-* and the *s*-mobile, however, are required by Gk. *σκότος*, OIr. *scáth*, Goth. *skadus*, etc.

**Phraseology:** Hóðr's epithets and characterization reflect an original association with [DARKNESS].

- (1) *blindi Ás* “the blind, sightless god” (*Skáld*. 13; cf. *Gylf*. 28); Hóðr can not see (*Gylf*. 49).<sup>4</sup>
- (2) *Baldrs bani* ‘killer of Baldr’ (*Skáld*. 13; *Bdr. passim*); Hóðr kills Baldr (*Gylf*. 49). Baldr “bright” god:

## 2. Inner-Germanic parallels: PGmc \*skadwa- ‘shadow’

Reflexes: Goth. *skadus*, OE *sceadu*, *scead*, OS *skado*, OHG *skato* ‘shadow’

## 3. Indo-European parallels

- (1) **Proto-Celtic** \*skōtu- ‘pertaining to concealment, shadow’

Reflexes: OIr. *scáth* ‘shadow, reflection, mirror, shelter’, Welsh *ysgawd* ‘shadow, darkness’, Corn. *scod* ‘shadow’, Bret. *skeud* ‘shadow, image’ (Irslinger 2002:126)

- (2) **Vedic** *māṁś-catú-* ‘moon-concealment’

Attested 3x (RV). Synchronic meaning “the time of the hiding of the moon” (Jamison-Brereton 2014).<sup>5</sup>

To sum up: ON *Hóðr* as reflex of PIE \*(s)kót-u-/két-u- ‘concealment, shadow, darkness’.

## C1. Baldr's love for Nanna and death at the hands of Loki and Hóðr: new insight

Insight obtained: new understanding of the myth of Baldr, Nanna, and Hóðr. Important elements:

- (1) The male protagonist is a god associated with [LIGHT], namely Baldr.
- (2) Baldr's love interest is *Nanna* ‘Maiden’, the daughter of *Nefr* ‘Sky’ (\*néb<sup>h</sup>-es-).
- (3) The maiden Nanna is spied upon by Baldr while she bathes.
- (4) Baldr is pierced by Hóðr (\*s)kót-u- ‘Darkness’) at the direction of Loki (originally a fire-god).
- (5) After Baldr is pierced to death, all gods are confused and perplexed at first.
- (6) The gods send Hermóðr to search for Baldr. He succeeds in finding him.

## C2. The Vedic myth of Sun's love for Dawn and wounding by Fire with darkness

Attested already in the Rigveda (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE). Plot reconstructed by Jamison (1991:133–303):

- Father Sky / the Sun desires the maiden Uṣas ‘Dawn’, the daughter of the Sky / Sun.
- As a punishment for his incestuous desire, he is pierced “with darkness” (possibly referring to smoke) by the fire-god Agni (called Rudra or Svarbhānu).
- The Sun falls from the heavens. All living beings are confused and perplexed.
- The gods realize the danger and send Atri to find the Sun. He succeeds and restores cosmic order.

<sup>4</sup> NB: ON *blindr* < PGmc \*blinda- ‘blind’, but also ‘dark, concealed’ (EWA, s.v. *blint*). This kind of twofold semantics is typologically very common, cf. Ved. *andhá-* ‘blind, dark’, Lat. *caecus* ‘id.’.

<sup>5</sup> According to Jamison-Brereton 2014 (ad 7.44), it originally referred only to dawn and later came to refer to both twilights.

### C3. IE myths of a light-god's love and wounding: comparison and reconstruction

Common origin for Norse myth of Baldr's death and Vedic myth of the Wounding of the Sky/Sun.

- (1) The male protagonist is a god associated with [LIGHT].
- (2) The [LIGHT]-god's love interest is a [MAIDEN], the [DAUGHTER – of the SKY].
- (3) The [MAIDEN] is described as being seen while she bathes.
- (4) The [LIGHT]-god is pierced (not just hit or slain) by a [FIRE]-god with the aid of [DARKNESS].
- (5) After the [LIGHT]-god is pierced, all gods and living beings in general are in a state of confusion.
- (6) The gods send a character to search for the [LIGHT]-god. The character succeeds in finding him.

### D. To sum up

- (1) ON *Nanna* 'Maiden' (cf. *Vsp.* 30<sup>9</sup>); *Nefr* reflex of PIE \*nēb<sup>h</sup>-es- 'sky, cloud' (Hitt. *nepiš-* 'sky', Ved. *nábhās-* 'humidity, cloud, sky'); *Nanna Nepsdóttir* "the Maiden, Sky's Daughter".  
Exact matches in Greek (Kore 'Maiden', "daughter of Zeus [\*Sky]"), Vedic (Dawn, 'maiden' and "Sky's daughter"); partial match in Lithuanian (Sun, "daughter of Diēvas [\*Sky-god]").
- (2) ON *Hqðr* reflex of PIE \*(s)kót-u-/két-ū- 'concealment, shadow, darkness' (root \*(s)ket- 'conceal').  
Exact match in Vedic (*māṁś-catú-* 'hiding of the moon' : *két-ū-*); indirect reflexes in Germanic (\**skadwa-* 'shadow') and Celtic (\**skōtu-* 'pertaining to concealment, shadow').
- (3) Further support from comparative mythology: onomastics, phraseology, and narrative structures of Baldr's myth match those of Vedic myth of "Sky/Sun's love for Dawn and wounding by Fire with darkness". Possible reconstruction of an IE myth of "the Light-god's love and wounding".