

## Justifying the Modern Practice of Reciprocity with Hel

In Norse Mythology, there are many Death Gods. Odin is a Death God, Freyr is a Death God,<sup>1</sup> Freyja is a Death Goddess, HRE Davidson defended the interpretation of Njordr as a Death God,<sup>2</sup> and there are various others. But in this mythology populated with many deities so closely associated with death, when one refers to the kenning 'The Goddess of Death', they often mean a particular deity who lives separately from these Gods. She has no placenames, no known temples or idols, but her mastery over death is said to even apply to the Gods themselves, making her arguably the most powerful among the Gods; her name is Hel.

In my experience, I've seen many kennings appended to Hel in modern practice, only some of which with historical attestation: Howewarder; Entombed Goddess;<sup>3</sup> Matron of the Dead; Walker Between Worlds; and Our Lady in Blue. Hel, the Goddess of Death is among the most controversial of the Norse Gods. Many do not worship her because she is the daughter of Loki, described as a monster, even referenced as evil,<sup>4</sup> and cast out of Asgard.<sup>5</sup> She seems to supply Loki at Ragnarok with an army of the dead,<sup>6</sup> assisting Surtr, Jormungandr, and Fenrir at the twilight of the Gods. Over time, she has been described by Christians as a Queen of Devils,<sup>7</sup> and even as a competitor with Satan himself.<sup>8</sup>

This is only one interpretation that we have of the Goddess of Death and it is strictly from the perspective of Christians dealing with the personification of death. It's likely that this is a warped image of a very different deity, an image that resulted from the importing of the Norse deity into Christian theology and subsequently cast as a demon as was the case with many of the more feared Gods of polytheist traditions. It's also possible that Hel is simply a later Christian fabrication, a Goddess that was never worshipped in antiquity in the first place. So, how does the Reconstructionist justify a practice with Hel? What might it look like? Should that practice be one which engages in reciprocity? Let's explore the information we have.

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<sup>1</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, 169-170. discusses Freyr's interesting relationship with death. HRE Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 154-156 also goes into this dynamic.

<sup>2</sup> Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 134-138.

<sup>3</sup> Scudder and Thorson, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 60. Grettir the Strong refers to Hel as "The woman who reigns entombed in the realm of the dead".

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> There's a discrepancy between Snorri's *Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*. Snorri places Loki with an army of the dead, but the *Voluspa* places Loki as steering the ship populated with the Sons of Muspell.

<sup>7</sup> Waggoner, *Sagas of Imagination: A Medieval Icelandic Reader*, "The Saga of the Apostle Bartholomew," 76.

<sup>8</sup> In *The Old English Gospel of Nicodemus*, the character of Inferno from the Latin text is recorded as "Seo Hell" which means "She-Hell".

## The Process of Reconstruction

The basic motivation from the perspective of a Reconstructionist might be that we feel pulled toward one tradition or another that has roots in a bygone era. Often, these traditions have died out for a number of reasons, commonly associated with the expansion of Christianity. Whether these populations converted forcefully by the sword or from economic pressures applied by surrounding kingdoms, the fact remains that common practice died out and remains trapped in history. Often the image we have of these traditions is obscured by layers dirt and the evolution of tradition as various folk practices gained new context under Christianity. The goal of the Reconstructionist is to rebuild a coherent image of this lost religion for modern practice, be that the practice of an individual or a group.

We recognize that those in the past gained connection with these Gods, and we endeavor to do the same. This is done through finding information about how those in the past practiced with these deities and doing our best to imitate that practice where reasonable. Sometimes, what we find in history is something easily imitated. Sometimes, it's something that we should not imitate. Sometimes we simply cannot find an answer to the question of what we are looking to imitate.

With that being said, this image of practice rebuilt through this process will not be the same as that one in the past. It may have similarities. Some similarities are intentional, based on information we have found, and some may be by chance based on a lucky guess of the practitioner. However, those similarities cannot be verified due to the nature of history's ability to obscure its hidden truths.

So, our journey with the Gods in reconstruction is one beset with unsolvable puzzles ranging from the specifics of a deity's association with various themes, to the philosophical underpinnings of the nature of the Gods in the first place. Generally, however, Reconstructionists accept that one engages with the Gods through a process of reciprocity, of giving gifts in the form of offerings in return for gifts given to us by the Gods. In the case of Hel, her very status as a deity is under question. Whether or not it is wise to engage in reciprocity with her in the first place is also under question.

### Who is Hel?

Was Hel a Jotun? Does this explain her absence in Asgard? When we look at the concept of a Jotun, the devouring and often malicious entities opposed by the Aesir, they are often the ones who consume or destroy something. Logi, an obvious example of this, is wildfire itself, a force that consumes forests and homes alike without regard for humanity. He is seen among those competing against Loki and Thor in the Prose Edda standing aside the likes of Old Age and Jormungandr.<sup>9</sup> Aegir, an entity who walks the line between God and Jotun, destroys ships at sea with his jaws.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Aegir is one who hosts the Gods during celebrations. One could establish him as one of the Gods, ruling a realm outside of Asgard, or a Jotun who is on friendly terms with the Aesir.

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<sup>9</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, Entry on "Logi," 213.

<sup>10</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 91. refers to Aegir's Jaws as the waves that destroy ships. This sentiment is repeated in Scudder and Oðskarsdóttir, *Egil's Saga*, 173. in which Egil wishes to kill Aegir for his part in his son's death at sea. He also includes Aegir's wife, Ran, in his fantasy of killing the Gods.

The image of Hel as a Devourer doesn't seem to fit. She isn't present at Ragnarok in any telling of it, however Loki is said to be followed by "Hel's Own" in Snorri's telling of Ragnarok.<sup>11</sup> The Larrington translation of the *Poetic Edda* contains a reference contradicting this in Voluspa 48, in which Loki steers the ship of the troops of Muspell rather than an army of the dead. This is supported in John Lindow's handbook on Norse Mythology, which favors this interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

Placing Hel within mythology as a hero or a villain is difficult, considering the various narratives around her. There is first the story of the birth of Hel as told by Snorri Sturluson. She is revealed as the daughter of Loki and Angrboda, the Bringer of Sorrow, sometimes referred to as The Mother of Monsters, about whom we have no description or information other than her name, that she is a Jotun, and her offspring. The children of Angrboda are Jormungandr, Fenrir, and Hel. At the time of their birth, each of these children were seen as a risk by Odin. Hel was thrown out of Asgard, but interestingly was given dominion over Helheim, and the responsibility to dole out dwellings to those who arrive in her care. A description is given of her abode, her bed is called the Sick-Bed, her knife is called Famine, her home is named after unpleasant storms. She is described as half flesh and half decay,<sup>13</sup> suggesting one foot in life and the other in death.

While Jormungandr and Fenrir are removed from Asgard and seen as a threat, Hel seems to be a little different. She is the only among the three granted with power and authority. This gives suggestion that Hel is not the evil being as she is often painted. Perhaps, she cannot coexist with the other deities due to her close association with death, but this instead puts her in a unique position to fill a role unable to be filled by the other Gods. Note too that Ran, the Sea Goddess of Death, resides outside of Asgard with Aegir, though it does not seem that her presence is an issue for the Gods.<sup>14</sup>

As stated earlier, there are other Death Gods. Freyr is strongly associated with the grave, Odin with the battlefield, Freyja with women,<sup>15</sup> Njordr might guide burial ships to Helheim,<sup>16</sup> and these are but a few. However, these death associations are secondary to their primary associations. Only Hel and Ran are considered deities specifically related to death as their primary association. Ran may yet be a guide to Helheim, with tokens of gold as reciprocity for her guidance and hospitality, filling a similar role to Charon in Greek Myth, who accepts coins in return for a ferry across the river Styx.

Snorri writes that she watches over those who die of sickness and old age. Yet, the main story we have featuring Hel discusses the God Baldr arriving in her care. This story both demonstrates her power and contradicts his earlier statement; Baldr did not die of sickness or old age. The story tells of the Gods, mainly Frigg, attempting to negotiate with Hel to release Baldr, who is especially beloved among the Gods.

The Rider, Hermod, is sent to the underworld to broker the deal with Hel. He sees Baldr and his wife Nanna sitting with Hel on the high seat of honor. Hermod stays through the night, and in the

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<sup>11</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 54. refers to Loki with "Hel's People". Sturluson and Byock, *The Prose Edda*, 72. refers to "Hel's Own" with Loki, both suggesting perhaps an army of the dead.

<sup>12</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, Entry on "Loki," 219.

<sup>13</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Scudder and Oðskarsdoðttir, *Egil's Saga*, 170. Egil's daughter references death as to "go to join Freyja".

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 134-138.

morning asks Hel if he may take Baldr home with him. Hel responds, saying that only if all things in the world, alive or dead, weep for Baldr can he be allowed to return. If any object, he must remain.

Hermod leaves with gifts from Baldr and Nanna for Odin and Frigg, showing an example of gifts coming from Helheim to another world. Hermod returns to the Aesir and delivers the gifts. Frigg tries her best to fulfill the task assigned by Hel, but ultimately fails.<sup>17</sup> The Aesir are known to have a wealth of power, even the power to conquer and defeat their enemies, and yet, they cannot do so with Hel, as even the Gods cannot override the Goddess of death.

There are a million questions about the story of Baldr's arrival in Helheim with his wife. There are even questions about Baldr's status as a deity, as he is a human hero in Saxo's History of the Danes. Though Saxo may have been employing Euhemerism here, which is an approach of humanizing the Gods employed by various historians through the ages, even Saxo.<sup>18</sup> Even in Saxo's story of Baldr, however, there is a Goddess of Death that reaches out in a dream and tells the fatally wounded Baldr that in three days she will take him in her arms, allowing him to make peace with his death, drawing parallels with Snorri's story.

Mentions of Hel seem inconsistent. She is referenced both as evil and as a caretaker. Both as an enemy of the Gods, and as a deity given a responsibility which she takes so seriously that she can deny the Gods themselves, no matter how much that which lies in her possession may be beloved by them.

If she were evil, we would imagine the afterlife in her control to be a haunting place. And we receive some descriptions of such a place in Snorri's *Edda*, in which he describes Nastrond, where punishments are doled out, with walls woven of snakes' spines, flowing with rivers of poison.<sup>19</sup> However, Nastrond seems to be an afterlife distinct from Helheim, and we have two major descriptions of what seem to be the 'normal' afterlife, which do not suggest that Nastrond is the standard. The story surrounding the death of Thorstein Codbiter includes his acceptance into the afterlife. It is described as a warm place of celebration where he is invited to the high seat by his father, just as Baldr sits in the high seat with Hel. Thorstein is accompanied by his crew, who were all lost at sea along with him.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, the story of Thorstein's journey to the afterlife is quite interesting. One might suspect that Snorri's retelling of Hel's placing Baldr at the high seat as an honor unique to the Gods. However, the story of Thorstein reuniting with his ancestors has the same element. This would show that the honor of the high seat and a celebratory entrance to the afterlife is not something reserved only for the Gods, but for humans as well. His story also creates an interesting question for the status of Ran, as Thorstein and his crew die at sea, and yet they are seen at the entrance to the afterlife of his ancestors at Helgafell. One might use this to support the conception of Ran as a Death Goddess who operates as a guide to the afterlife for fallen sailors. However, one must recognize in examining this conception that

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<sup>17</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 50-51.

<sup>18</sup> Grammaticus, Fisher, and Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes – Book One*, 21-22 and 25. Saxo discusses in Book One of his History of the Danes the reasoning behind his inclusion of the Gods in his history. His justification is made on 21-22 where he details that the Gods were actually wizards that had fooled people into worshipping them. Snorri's *Edda* opens with another euhemerist telling of the Gods, placing Thor as a descendant of Trojans who would travel north through Thrace, eventually marrying Sif who he found in the "northern part of the world" Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Sturluson and Faulkes, *Edda*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 37-38.

historically there was variety in practice and in images of the pantheon. Ran could easily have been a Death Goddess with a watery afterlife in her own right to those in one location and time, and a guide to those lost at sea in another location and/or time.

The second major description is of King Hading led into the afterlife by a mysterious woman. She shows him visions on the way to Helheim, but the journey ends at the gates. The woman then throws a beheaded rooster over the wall, and its call is heard on the other side, show that this is a place of life even in death.<sup>21</sup> This woman is not given a name. She is only described as standing next to a fire with herbs out of season. But perhaps this guide was Hel herself.

This would be in line with the idea that there was worship of Hel in antiquity. The evidence of this is scant, however, it is possible that Hel is simply a later personification of Death. It's also possible that Hel is the assimilation of several death matrons with varying status of rulership in the land of the dead. There is evidence that the stories surrounding Hel date back to the Migration Era though representations consistent with the stories around her depicted on bracteates (pendants featuring artistic representations, religious themes are common). But bracteates 14Rv<sup>22</sup> and 124Rv<sup>23</sup> may depict Hel meeting a rider and have consistency with the scene described by Snorri as Hermod brokers for Baldr's life. The story could be incredibly old, or this scene could be depicting an entirely different story lost to time. It should be noted that much of the context for these ancient artifacts is unfortunately lost.



14 Av b



14 Rv b

14 Av b und Rv b Aneby-M



124 Av b



124 Rv b

124 Av b und Rv b Mauland-M (4:1) (125 auf Taf. 159)

<sup>21</sup> Grammaticus, Fisher, and Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes – Book One*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Hauck, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit*, 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 161-162.

Whatever the reality of her ancient worship, Christians would later recast her as evil and even as a demon in later mentions. In *The Saga of the Apostle Bartholomew*, Hel is referenced by a demon living within an idol as his queen, though she is not mentioned beyond this. The demon essentially just gives the sentiment of 'Yass Queen' and then moves on.<sup>24</sup> Another Christian account, *The Old English Gospel of Nicodemus* translates the character of Inferno as Seo Hell, which is the word Hel with a feminine pronoun modifying it. This would translate to 'She-Hell', suggesting that there was a cultural background of a feminine Hell, giving credence to the influence of a feminine death Goddess, singular or multiple, in Anglo-Saxon culture.

This seems to a Christian recasting of a Death God into an evil character, similar to modern media depictions of the Greek God Hades.<sup>25</sup> This is similar to the habit of Christians writing the sagas of recasting religious pagans into atheists as soon as they are heroes. We can see a similar dynamic the Gods. The passages I mentioned before support the idea of a maternal Goddess of Death that fits the role of a caretaker. It's not hard to imagine that Christians replaced the caretaker of the afterlife, or perhaps caretakers, with a demon. Can't have another afterlife rolling around with conversions to make. There are conversion quotas to reach. Though, the plan to turn that competitor afterlife figure into a demoness so that no one will worship her seems to have backfired as we come into the modern era, because now we think that's really freakin' cool.

This image of Hel as evil does not quite fit in with the rest of Norse Mythology. If she is so haunting, why do so many Gods seem to guide souls to her? Why are mountains<sup>26</sup> and graves associated with the afterlife considered reverent and sacred, and not places of fear? It seems to me that these narratives of Hel as a demon supplanted a healthier view of Death's place as part of our world among all other things.

But if this leads us to believe in a more caring, maternal energy about Hel, then why are there no placenames? No Idols? There only seems to be a possible suggestion of her worship here and there. The answer to this might be hinted at in the Saga of Grettir the Strong, who, in describing a close brush with death, says of Hel that she laid claim to his life, but that his friend kept Loki's deathly daughter at bay, saving his life.<sup>27</sup>

Egil Skallagrimsson says similarly of Hel when he mourns the loss of his sons. He remarks that Hel awaits him as well, but he stands resolute, waiting for his own death, suggesting it is not here just yet.<sup>28</sup> Afterward, he holds the funeral for his sons. These examples suggest it is possible that though Hel was seen as a caring hostess of the Afterlife, and a respected deity, that she was one best kept at a distance.

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<sup>24</sup> Waggoner, *Sagas of Imagination: A Medieval Icelandic Reader*, "The Saga of the Apostle Bartholomew," 76.

<sup>25</sup> Disney's depiction of Hades in *Hercules* (1997) seems wildly out of character for his depiction in myth. The same could be said of the depiction of Hades in the remake of *Clash of the Titans* (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 28-30. The mountain of Helgafell is considered important to Snorri the Priest and his family throughout the saga, starting with the settlement of his father, Thorolf Mostur-Beard.

<sup>27</sup> Scudder and Thorson, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Scudder and Oðskarsdoðttir, *Egil's Saga* pg176.

Both Egil and Grettir note Hel's controversial parentage<sup>29</sup> and siblings.<sup>30</sup> Death is, after all, not something one typically desires. It only makes sense that placenames and temples might be exceptions if they ever existed. One can imagine that if you apply the philosophy of reciprocity with the Goddess of Death, of exchanging gifts with a Goddess seen as more closely associated with death than anything else, that one would then receive gifts in the form of death. This would be, in effect, inviting death into your life. It would therefore be reasonable to view Hel with respect but have no desire for a close relationship with her.

There are those, however, who view Hel a little differently, including myself. To worship a Death God in the sense of Ran or Hel would be to acknowledge the service they perform for the dead. Ran is the guide at least if not the caretaker for the dead at sea. Hel is the caretaker of our ancestors, and this is a position granted to her by Odin, the Alfater of the Aesir. Reciprocity would be offerings in thanks for this service, which is a gift given by the Goddess of Death, one that you too may receive.

This is strengthened by the sailors in *The Saga of Fridthjof the Bold*, who sing a hymn mentioning Ran as Fridthjof breaks apart a gold ring so that he can give a piece to each of his sailors to give to Ran should they be lost to the torrential waves.<sup>31</sup> A gift is given for a gift received, in this case a gift of gold for Ran's cold embrace to the afterlife. If reciprocity makes sense with Ran, why not with Hel? Now it may make sense that this reciprocity is given to Ran at the time of death, that this functions as a sort of funerary offering for those who will likely be absent for their funeral if their bodies are lost at sea. Interestingly, in the late 400s, the Roman Sidonius records of the Saxons that they would sacrifice one out of every ten of their prisoners to their Sea God on the eve of their departure to secure safe passage.<sup>32</sup> Might these sacrifices be simply a Saxon image of Aegir? Or might they have been also to a Saxon image of Ran as a sign of respect, and in honor of those lost at sea? Sidonius' letter makes no conclusion on this matter, only calling the practice a profane superstition explained by their understanding of religious duty.

Part of my personal stance on this is inspired by, or at least strengthened by, Egil's comment on Hel waiting for him on the Ness, meaning the shore, the boundary between land and water. She isn't chasing him. She's waiting calmly, as death is patient. She is a guide between that border for the dead, whenever they go to meet her. Her appearance of half flesh and half decay described in Snorri's Edda might symbolize that she is able to walk easily between the land of the dead and the living, as she is both.

Some heathens have views of the afterlife coupled with a desire to go to Valhalla, Folkvangr, or one of the many afterlives described throughout Norse Mythology. For me, however, I have an expectation that, should the afterlife exist, I'll wind up in Helheim. If that is the case, that's one more reason that reciprocity with Hel would make sense.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>31</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Fridthjof the Bold*, 68.

<sup>32</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris and Anderson, *Sidonius II: Letters, Books 3-9*, "to Namatius," 428-433.

## The Hel-Blot Ritual

Around Halloween I hold a Blot, that is a heathen ritual, to Hel, the text of which I'll break down later in this paper. Sometimes it is with a group, sometimes it is not. And this is an entirely modern practice within my own approach to the faith. But the practice is one that acknowledges the various aspects of the arguments presented here. That fostering of reciprocity is easily justified. It's also easily justified that perhaps Hel is a Goddess best kept at a respectful distance.

The solution to this is that ritual is performed with a mask. Mine is one of a skull which covers the top half of my face. This mask represents a ritual symbol of that desire for distance while also expressing respect. This practice ties in well with the modern traditions around Halloween. The offering in the case of this ritual is messages for those in her care, written on paper, and burned in sacrifice, potentially along with other offerings. Now, that's for my practice. It may not fit in yours. Maybe it does. Either is fine.

It is important to point out here that many do not share that sentiment toward Hel, and prefer to respond to her maternal energy with a close relationship. This is entirely reasonable and one that I support and engage in myself. The point of this particular approach in this blot is to foster ritual consent. Those with a closer relationship with Hel are free to participate, as are those who wish to engage simply for the purposes of the ritual, and may have an uneasiness about Hel. For example, one who feels a closer relationship with Hel might bring a mask that is heavily decorated, signifying an excitement for a deity they have a close relationship with, and excitement for participating in a blot to their celebrated deity with others. At the same time, one who does not share that close relationship is not barred from participating, and can wear a mask as a sign of ritual distance while not awkwardly standing out among others in the practice.

For this section, I will take you through the text of the Hel-blot and discuss the reconstructionist approach in justifying the verbal aspects of the ritual, and the method of reciprocity for Hel. The opening for the gathering will be to form a circle. An altar can be included in the middle, though I have performed this rite with simply a bonfire in the middle.<sup>33</sup> The opening of the ritual is as follows:

Today we gather to honor a deity often ignored. Sometimes out of fear, sometimes because so little is known of her. She is a hidden goddess. Mysterious both in myth and history. There are no placenames for her, no idols, or known temples, and yet she is the one that greets our ancestors after death, welcoming them to her great hall, seeing to it that they are cared for. This is Hel, Goddess of Death, who we invite here today.

It is presumed that there are no placenames for Hel so as not to invite death into the lives of those who live there. So, for this ritual, we come before her with masks. We give her honor as the caretaker of our ancestors, but we recognize her power.

Let us hallow this space, and banish all ill wights from among us.

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<sup>33</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, "The Saga of Haakon the Good," 107. The ritual described in this Yule celebration is often a point of inspiration for modern practitioners.



I think it is useful to build a little justification and provide historical context in ritual. With this portion, the stage is set for Hel's mysterious nature. Not much is known about her. It seems that whatever practice that there was for her that existed in history remains in obscurity, and likely will forever. From there, we begin the hallowing.

May the Gods guide us,  
May our oaths keep us,  
May our deeds free us,  
May our ancestors aid us always.  
May the gods banish from this land and wood all evil and wrong,  
Hallow this place, shield this area from all baneful wights,  
Let the gods' blessing be over our heads! (Light central fire)

There are many stories of Hel's realm,  
of people who traveled there.  
Hading was once guided there,  
By a mysterious woman bearing herbs in winter.

The mysterious woman guided him,  
through dark clouds and a long, worn road,  
through a grand battle, eternally raging  
through beautiful fields of herbs to death's walls,  
where she wrung off the head of a rooster  
and flung him over the walls of Helheim  
the bird came to life, testified by a loud crow.

Here we reference the story from Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Danes: Book One* in which Hading's journey to the underworld is described.<sup>34</sup> The description here is lifted directly from the source, giving a brief summary of the facts of the story and delivering it in ritual form.

There are many stories of Hel's realm.  
of people who traveled there.  
Thorstein had fared out to fish with his men  
A great bounty to seek for his family

But on the evening his shepherd saw his father's sacred mountain  
open wide on the north side.  
inside he could see mighty fires,  
and could hear a great clamor within  
with the clank of drinking horns  
He struggled to get closer, that he might hear their words,  
He caught the words of welcome to Thorstein and his crew  
and heard them bid Thorstein sit in the high seat by his father.

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<sup>34</sup> Grammaticus, Fisher, and Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes – Book One*, 30-31.

This is the same basic approach as the first stanza, pulling from the story in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, also known as *The Saga of the Ere Dwellers*.<sup>35</sup> The description here has the same approach of hitting the basic points in the story of Thorstein's death and journey to the afterlife. While Hel is not mentioned in this story, she can be associated with this passage through her connection to the afterlife.

Hel, Goddess of the Dead, we hear these stories of old.  
Only hints of your realm we hear,  
A land without death,  
A land forever green and growing,  
A land of celebration and love,  
A land at the end of a difficult road.

This is the place you have prepared for our ancestors. Hail, and  
welcome to thee, Hel, Goddess of the Dead.

This portion combines the descriptions seen in the story of Hading's journey to the underworld, and Thorstein's warm welcome from his ancestors at the opening of Helgafell. The conclusion that can be drawn from these stories is that the afterlife, whatever it may be, is a pleasant place. The stories we have about the entrance to the afterlife do not seem to contain attestations of some kind of experience of something like the Christian Hell. And in the case of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, the Christian writer delivers us a description of a warm familial afterlife.

The Hidden Goddess, Hail!

All: Hail!

Maiden of Helheim, Hail!

All: Hail!

Grave Guardian, Hail!

All: Hail!

Walker Between Worlds, Hail!

All: Hail!

Matron of the Dead, Hail!

All: Hail!

She who is Death and Life, Hail!

All: Hail!

The Lady in Blue, Hail!

All: Hail!

Goddess who Rules Entombed, Hail!

All: Hail!

To our ancestors in Hel's care, Hail!

All: Hail!

Those souls who went before us, Hail!

All: Hail!

Hail to the ancestors!

All: Hail!

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<sup>35</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 37-38.

This is a list of kennings that are pulled from various sources, and extrapolations based on available data. Grave Guardian, Howewarder, Matron of the Dead, and Maiden of Helheim are likely obvious extrapolations for a Death Goddess. Walker Between Worlds is justified through her dominion over death in application to those beyond humanity, and that through Myth can be justified to apply even to the Gods. Whether or not Baldr is actually 'dead' may vary based on theological approach, but the myth contained in Snorri's *Edda* still demonstrates a certain power that Hel has over multiple realms.

She Who is Death and Life comes from the description of her in Snorri's *Edda* being that of half decayed flesh and half living flesh. This attribute about her may contribute to her as one who walks between worlds, as she has one foot in life and one in death.

Goddess Who Rules Entombed is lifted from *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*<sup>36</sup> in which Grettir refers to Hel as "The woman who reigns entombed in the realm of the dead." It's one of the few historical kennings that relates something about her beyond her parentage or siblings. Kennings that could be justified might be "Daughter of Loki" or "Sister of Fenrir" from similar passages.

The Lady in Blue is a modern kenning formed within practice related to my personal group. It's inspired by the pattern of color associations in *Eyrbyggja Saga* in which people who are set out with a motivation to kill often wear either black or blue. The Kenning "The Lady in Blue" or "Our Lady in Blue" has become a reference to Hel in part due to that saga also containing the story of Thorstein's journey to the afterlife. The color blue's association with death in the narrative justifies the kenning.

Hel, we have brought for you gifts to you and the dead. Memories, words of closure, or a message of thanks, spoken or written, offered before the fire. These we sacrifice to you, in thanks for your care of the dead.

Interactive / In Person: If you wish to speak, you may, if you wish to stay silent, you may. If you have any additional gift, you may add it to the fire.

Led Ritual / Digital: As offerings are given, we offer a gift of silence for our loved ones who have passed. If you have any additional gift, you may add it to the fire.

(Offerings are given, horn is passed)

Hel, we wish for you to accept these messages as our sacrifice and thanks to you. Please carry them to our ancestors and loved ones in your care, and may they help you better know those who are there.

(Pour dregs of horn into offering bowl)

It's important for modern ritual formats to provide options for a digital formulation of the ritual. Something that I and others learned while running a Heathen community during the Covid pandemic was the viability of holding rituals over the internet. Those participating bring their own ritual gear,

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<sup>36</sup> Scudder and Thorson, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 60. Grettir the Strong refers to Hel as "The woman who reigns entombed in the realm of the dead".

ranging from candles, idols, bowls, etc, and follow along with the ritual from home. Therefore, in this section, there are alternate portions of the ritual depending on the nature of the ritual.

The offering given during the ritual as a standard within the purpose of this ritual is notes to those in Hel's realm. Since Hel is seen chiefly as the Goddess of Death, and not just as a Goddess associated with some facet of death, it stands to reason that no matter which afterlife one may be in, Hel would have access to it in some way. These offerings, therefore, can be to any within that domain.

The passing of the horn is typically used in rituals with smaller numbers where someone can step forward and speak. For larger gatherings, however, this can take a significant period of time, and the one leading the ritual may consider omitting this portion. Another element of this to keep in mind, especially when considering pathogens, is the passing of the horn and multiple people drinking from the same horn. This can pose a risk that only increases with group size. As a result, it may be worth considering that everyone brings their own vessel for a toast during this portion.

There will be no blessings today, for the same reason there are no placenames. Hel is unique among the gods, and the time to receive her blessing is in death. Hel waits on the ness, but we stand resolute, and face our lives with courage. Only the Norns know the time we will meet the one who rules entombed, our lady in blue.

This portion is justified through the same justification given to the masks. The distance maintained from Hel by Egil, who describes her as a waiting Goddess, gives the sense that Hel is a deity whose blessings are delivered upon death.<sup>37</sup> One could easily justify a closer relationship with Hel in personal practice, however, but in the case of a group ritual, this is an aspect that allows for maximal participation. For those wishing to perform a ritual that takes into consideration a closer relationship to Hel with the consent of all those participating, this passage can easily be modified.

From the gods, to the earth, to us.  
From us, to the earth, to the gods.  
A gift has been given.  
So let it be.

To a land without death,  
A land forever green and growing,  
A land of celebration and love,  
A land at the end of a difficult road.

Hel, Hidden Goddess, Matron of the Dead, hail and farewell.

ALL: Hail!

May the gods depart, friends, blot has ended.  
Let us all feast and celebrate our ancestors,  
Who will one day greet us as well!

This, like the opening, is a standard closing to a Heathen ritual. Sometimes people will wish to stay after ritual with the fire. Sometimes this is in silence, sometimes there is quiet discussion as the fire

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<sup>37</sup> Scudder and Oðskarsdoftir, *Egil's Saga*, 176.

is cared for. Obviously, if a bonfire is used, those in the gathering should practice fire safety and ensure the fire is put out if the ritual area is to be left unattended after blot.

Hel is a mysterious Goddess, and that mystery around her has evoked much in the way of curiosity around her nature. This makes the creation of a blot around her a challenge, especially taking into consideration the myriad of perspectives around her that are held by modern practitioners. The lack of information around some of the deities of the past can offer opportunities for innovation on practice. I think that any practice around Hel is one of those situations.

As modern practice around Hel is expanded upon and developed by those with differing perspectives, no doubt there will be variety in practice given the lack of available specific historical information or evidence around the Goddess. It's likely that this will result in a wide diversity of practices, many of which using the same evidence that I've used here in justifying the practice I've presented. Doing so would be reasonable, as there are multiple rational ways of interpreting the information we have. These perspectives could also change significantly if new evidence were to arise. Hel could be a maternal figure, a distant figure, multiple figures, and the approach in exploring these attributes may result in different weighting of different attributes. Of course, this will be reflected in other Hel-blots that arise in modern practice.

In order to conduct a Hel-blot, one must innovate because we have no information on what that ritual would have looked like, when it might have been, or even if it would have existed in the first place. This is but one innovation that I've found helpful in exploring spiritually for myself, including in the process of justifying it. I have hope for further innovations in practice related to Hel in the future.

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